The Importance of Thematic Structure in Students' Writing Cohesion

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Abstract

Thematic structure plays a major role in organizing the message and in enabling it to be communicated and understood clearly. One issue in students' writing is how students tackle this cohesive device. There is a considerable agreement among linguists that theme acts as a cohesive device in the texts. This paper was centered on reviewing the status of thematic development and progression in students' writing. Reviewing previously conducted studies attest to the fact that thematic structures are greatly effective and valuable tools in writing process. Theme and rheme patterning can also be effectively applied in classrooms to help students in writing. Students will know where they are losing their effectiveness in their arguments due to problems with either thematic progression or thematic selection, or both.

Keywords: Theme, Rheme, Thematic Structure, Cohesion

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Introduction

In Halliday and Matthissen's scheme, grammar is part of language that can be interpreted from different viewpoints. In one view, language is a set of rules to specify structures; so, grammar as a subsystem of language is also a set of rules that specifies grammatical structures. In the other view, language is a resource that can create meaning through wording (1997, p. 1). Systemic functional grammar theory associated with the school of linguistics was first developed in the work of the grammar of Chinese and used in educational and computational contexts. Unlike the grammatics that is usually presented in school, "systemic-functional grammatics takes the resource perspective rather than the rule perspective" and shows "the overall system of grammar rather than only fragments" (Halliday & Mathiessen, 1977, p. 2). In the same line of argumentation, Martin and Rose (2007) also report:

> "Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a big multi-perspectival theory with more dimensions in its theory banks that might be required for any one job. SFL is called systemic because compared with other theories it foregrounds the organization of language as options for meaning and is also functional because it interprets the design of language with respect to ways people use it to live (pp. 21, 24)."

In this approach, the main focus is on clause, and as Halliday (1994, p. 19) states, the mode of interpretation in this approach is functional in which the grammatical structure is being explained referring to the meaning and there is a general principle in language that larger units act more directly in the realization of higher-level patterns .

In the existing literature in Systemic Linguistics, researchers consider clause as made by a combination of three metafunctions (Halliday, 1985; Halliday & Mathiessen, 1997; Martin & Rose, 2007; Ping, 2003). These three metafunctions are as follows:

1. Interpersonal metafunction: Martin and Rose (2007) point out that interpersonal metafunction "is concerned with negotiation of social relations: How people are interacting, including the feelings they try and share" (p. 24). Halliday and Mathiessen

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(1997) emphasize that one of the major grammatical systems of this kind of metafunction is mood, the grammaticalization of speech function (p. 11).

2. Ideational metafunction: Martin and Rose (2007) say that ideational metafunction "is concerned with construing experience: What's going on, including who's doing what to whom, where, when, why, how, and the logical relation of one going on to another" (p. 24). In Halliday and Mathiessen's viewpoint, transitivity, "the resource for construing our experience the flux of 'goings-on', as structural configurations, each consisting of a process, the participants involved in the process, and circumstances attendant on it, is one of major ideational metafunction's grammatical systems (1997, p. 11). As Halliday (1994) states, "transitivity structures express representational meaning: what the clause is about, which is typically some process, with associated participants and circumstances" (p. 179).

3. Textual metafunction: As Martin and Rose (2007) mention, textual metafunction "is concerned with information flow: The ways in which ideational and interpersonal resources are distributed in waves of semiotic, including interconnections among waves and between language and attendant modalities" (p. 24). Halliday and Mathiessen (1997) argue that theme is one of the major textual systems. It is the resource to set up a local context for a clause by selecting a local point of departure in the flow of information (p. 11).

Davidse (1987) argues that these metafunctions are both intrinsic and extrinsic to language. In the first place, they are separate components, or semantic organizing principles, of the grammar. But the ideational and interpersonal functions also finally refer to social reality. They represent the social uses to which language is put (p. 51). He also asserts that the metafunctions are a key concept in Halliday's theory since they explain the internal organization of language and are systematically related to the register variables of field, tenor, and mode (p. 57).

Matthiessen (2004) also mentioned that the textual mode of expression is based on degree of prominence. Prominence may be considered in one of three ways: 1) positionally by means of culminative placement at the beginning or the end of the clause; 2) segmentally by means of

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some prominence marker that emphasizes one element out of the other elements of the clause; 3) intonationally by means of tonic prominence (p. 549).

In Halliday and Mathiessen's (1997) mind, the textual metafunction-which, as stated by Gosden (1992), is manifested as *theme* in the clause- engenders resources for presenting interpersonal and ideational meanings as information organized into text that can be ongoingly exchanged between producer and receiver. This involves transitions in the development of text (conjunctive relations) and the assignment of different textual statuses. These transitions and statuses enable the exchange of information; the producer is guiding the receiver in interpreting the unfolding text (p. 19).

A. The Concept of Theme and Rheme
Thematic definitions are divided into two sub-parts:
1. Pure definitions which mean that different scholars just provide us with the definitions of theme and rheme.
2. Applied definitions which mean that scholars do not just provide us with definitions of theme and rheme but they also consider the practical side of the definitions and how they are applicable to language teaching contexts.

A.1.Pure Definitions
The hallmark of the Prague School is the division of the communicative structure in two areas (theme and rheme) and simultaneous assumption that this is basic order of sentence if there is no contextual reason for changing it.
Different functional definitions of theme and rheme are to be found in the work of different scholars. Halliday (1985, p. 30) defines theme as the

> "Element which serves as the point of departure of the message and what the speaker has in mind to start with. It is the element in a particular structural configuration taken as whole, organizes the clause as a message. The reminder of the message is called the rheme. Therefore, a clause consists of a theme

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combined with a rheme and the sentence is expressed by order. The order is theme followed by rheme".

Halliday (1985) elaborates further by arguing that "theme is what clause is about, and it comes in the first position, but this position is not what defines the theme; it is a means which realizes the function of the theme" (p. 39).

For Ghaddessy (1995), "the building blocks of spoken and written texts is clause, and each clause conveys a message that has two parts, what comes first is theme and what comes next is rheme" (p.134).

Green, Christopher, Lam, and Mei (2000) define the term theme as a material immediately preceding the main verb of the main clause. The material which includes the main verb and all other remaining constituents of the sentence constitutes the rheme (p. 100).

A.2. Applied Definitions

Fries (1992) declares that both native and non-native English speaking students have difficulty ordering words in their sentences. Teachers often experience difficulties explaining to students how they should order the information in their sentences. Two concepts are helpful in this task: theme and information focus. Theme is the point of departure of the clause as message. In English one can recognize themes because they occur first in the clause. Fries in his study showed that theme is a very important cohesive element that must be taken into account seriously in writing (p. 1).

Brown and Yule (1983) believe that one of the constraints on the speaker and writer is that they can produce only one word at a time when they are producing their message. They have to choose a beginning point for their utterance in order to organize their message. The initial point is important in the clause and also in the discourse. It influences the hearer and reader' interpretation of every thing that follows in the discourse since it constitutes the initial textual context for everything that follows. What is placed in the initial position is called theme (p.125).

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Ping (2000, p. 13) views theme as an element that generates the boundary of acceptability of possible rhemes from which only one is selected as the actual rheme since they would result in unacceptable clauses. Considering Hallidian framework of theme and rheme, Ping (2000) argues that this model has two fundamental problems:

1. It cannot be used to distinguish whether a clause is well- formed, unacceptable or dubious, because even an unacceptable clause is deemed to have a thematic structure.

2. It can not clarify that an initial element identified as theme of the clause is functioning as such (p. 5).

In light of the problems attached to Halliday framework, Ping (2000) suggested a new model called the inference-boundary model which interprets the theme/ rheme from a cognitive psychological perspective. Underlying this model is the schema theory and the role of inference during language processing. In this model the "head" and "non-head" distinction was used instead of using the textual, interpersonal, and topical theme labels. Thematic head of a clause refers to the element which is able to generate a boundary of acceptability and within which it is permissible for rheme to occur. Any element either preceding or following the thematic head is a thematic non- head and all called per-head or post -head respectively (p. 16).

This model can explain why clausal messages are sometimes difficult to process: Interference from the context, non appropriate or less elaborate schema, and theme/rheme mismatch. However, this model has some restrictions:

1- As it is centrally concerned with the theme structure at the level of clause, it can not clearly explain how some languages inputs succeed in conveying message even though they do not lend themselves easily to thematic analysis.

2- It becomes less useful when less reliance is needed on the thematic structure of language for successful communication to take place (Ping, 2000, p. 21).

Following his view of theme, he defines the theme as a constraining force on the development of the message. For him, theme/rheme notions have an explicit force to organize the clause as a message and draw attention to various cognitive psychological considerations (p.1).

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B. Thematic organization and thematic progression

Halliday (1985, p. 54) classified the elements which occur in initial position of the clause as follows:

1. Topical theme which is presented by a nominal group (e.g., everyone), a prepositional phrase (e.g., with ships continually at sea), or an adverbial group (e.g., by the middle of 15th century).

2. Interpersonal theme which consists of any combination of vocatives (direct addresses such as: personal names), modal adjuncts and mood marking elements (finite verbal operator (temporal & modal), WH-interrogatives and imperative *let's*.

3. Textual theme that includes continuatives (small set of discourse items which signal that a new move is beginning, such as: yes, no, oh…), structural elements (coordinates & subordinates) and conjunctive adjuncts which relate the clause to the preceding texts (e.g., in other words).

Following the above classification, Halliday (1985) introduced simple and multiple themes.

1. Simple themes always have a topical element.

> For example: *She* was so kind to her four cats.
>
>   topical

2. Multiple themes may have the interpersonal and textual themes in addition to topical theme (p. 55).

> For example: *And, the servant* was waiting for the cats.
>
>   textual   topical

The other categorization made by Halliday (1985) is marked and unmarked theme. When an element that occupies the theme position of the clause conflates with grammatical subject, this theme is called unmarked theme.

> For example: *The goat* went shopping.

But in marked theme, an element other than the subject occupies the theme position, so a condition is created for the appearance of marked theme (p.44)

> For example: *In the morning,* the goat went to jungle to find the wolf.

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Danes (1974, as cited in Downing, 2001, p. 5) proposed a number of thematic progression patterns that manifest differently in different genres as follows: linear TP, constant TP (or thematic iteration), split rheme, and split theme progression.

1. Linear TP: Danes (1974, as cited in Downing, 2001, p.5) refers to this as the most elementary or basic thematic progression pattern, where the item in the rheme of the first clause becomes the theme of the subsequent clause.

$$T1 \rightarrow R1$$
$$\downarrow$$
$$T2 (=R1) \rightarrow R2$$
$$\downarrow$$
$$T3 (=R2) \rightarrow R3$$
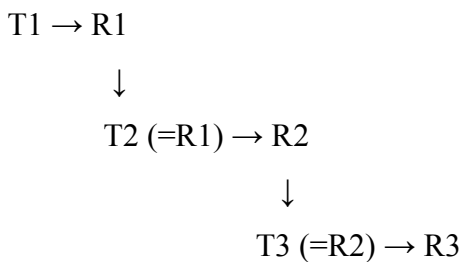
For example:

"*At this point* we must add an important qualification to what we have just said. *That* is, we are using the terms rule and rule-governed in the special way that linguists use them. *This usage* is very different from the layperson's understanding of the terms''.

2. Constant TP: In this pattern, the item in the theme of the first clause is also selected as the theme of the following clause, though not necessarily with identical wording.
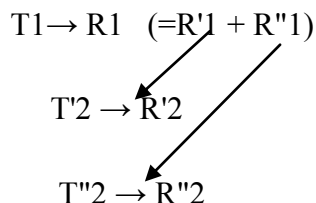
$$T1 \rightarrow R1$$
$$\downarrow$$
$$T2 \rightarrow R2$$
$$\downarrow$$
$$T3 \rightarrow R3$$
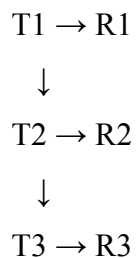
For example:

"*And yet we* understand them and don't even notice that they are new. *We* speak, *but usually we* are not aware of the movements of our tongue, lips, or other parts of the mouth or throat involved in the production of sounds".

**3. Split rhematic progression:** In this pattern, the rheme of the first clause is split into two items,

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each in turn being taken as a theme element in subsequent clauses.

$$T1 \rightarrow R1 \quad (=R'1 + R''1)$$
$$T'2 \rightarrow R'2$$
$$T''2 \rightarrow R''2$$

For example:

> "*I* will use the term 'language teaching method' to mean a coherent set of links between actions and thoughts in language teaching. *The actions* are the techniques *and the thoughts* are the principles in the title of this hook: *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*".

4. Split theme progression: To Danes' patterns of thematic progression one has been added. In this kind of thematic progression which was proposed by McCabe (1999, p. 175), the theme of the first clause is split into two or more ideas, and these ideas are developed in the themes of subsequent clauses.

$$T1 \rightarrow R1 \quad (=T'2 + T''1)$$
$$T'2 \rightarrow R'2$$
$$T''2 \rightarrow R''2$$
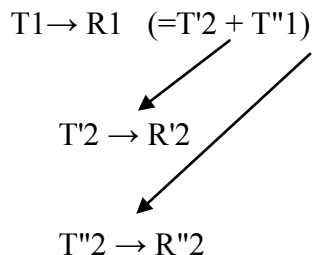
For example*:*

> *"The mother and the child made a plan. She first found the wolf and tore his stomach, and the child brought some stones to fill the wolf's stomach".*

Adopting the Danes' thematic progression patterns, McCabe (1999, p. 176) considered a revised model of Danes' TP patterns. She catagorized these patterns into 2 overall types: a) theme progression including constant theme and split theme and b) rheme progression including simple linear and split rheme. McCabe (1999) did not consider derived theme as a different sort of TP, since it may be related to proceeding themes and rhemes through some types of inference involved in simple linear or constant theme (p. 171). According to McCabe (1999), there are a

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rather large percentage of clauses which do not fit into any of the TP patterns proposed by Danes, since it appears that Danes employed a standard for theme specification which accords more with the notion of "given". Therefore, it is necessary to modify Danes' model in order to apply it in other analyses which use a different standard for theme specification (p. 270). What's more is that, Danes' model was only tested on English texts and a few other languages. So, more evidence is needed from other languages to see whether other systematic patterns emerge in texts in other languages.

Review of Related Literature

The notion of thematicity in students' writings have been addressed by many researchers such as (Belmonte & McCabe, 1998; Coffin & Hewings, 2005; Ebrahimi, 2008; Kularb, 2001; North, 2005; Ren et al, 2009; Thomas & Hewas, 1997; Wang, 2007).

In her study, North (2005) used systemic functional approach to analyze essays written by students from different backgrounds. 61 students from an Open University Course in the history of science (The *Rise of Scientific Europe 1550-1800*), during the academic years of 2002-2003, were selected. 33 students had *art* and 28 students had *science* background. As far as they had considerable variation in age, previous academic study, and working experience, a group of ten art students and a group of ten science students were selected as sample, similar in age, gender and formal education backgrounds. The students were asked to produce essays as part of their course assessment. The data contained 65234 words (p. 435).

The textual analysis of data showed that students with arts backgrounds obtained higher marks for their assignments than students with science backgrounds. This was attributed to the use of more orienting theme (consisting of textual, interpersonal, interpersonal and experiential elements). They provided more explicit guidance to the readers on how to construct a coherent interpretation of the text through the use of theme, and they used themes to form the discussion rather than fact. Art students also thematized other writers much more than science students who tended to make more use of unqualified assertions (North, 2005, p. 438). North concluded that

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thematic choices in the students' essays reflected different conceptions of knowledge of academic writing which themselves contributed to success in course assessment.

Wang (2007) studied the relationship between theme and rheme in the academic texts and in improving the textual cohesion in students' writing. For this study a text written by a sophomore student majoring in politics from South-Eastern University in China was selected as corpus of the study (p.5).

The analysis showed that the text was lacking in thematic progression. The problems were lack of cross-referential thematic progression, overuse of constant progression, and empty rheme (Wang, 2007, p.7). He concluded that students' weaknesses in their arguments are due to problems with either thematic progression or thematic selection, or both. Therefore, if students receive instruction on theme/rheme structure, they can improve the textual cohesion of their academic text.

Belmonte and McCabe (1998) attempted to show that theme /rheme can be very helpful as an instructional tool for the teacher to evaluate writing at the level of discourse (p.13). They analyzed 25 student compositions written for a mock T.W.E (test of writing English) exam in terms of thematic selection and progression. The T.W.E. exam required 30- minute written essays in response to a prompt, which involved students in giving their opinion on an issue. They first analyzed 40 professional texts of a similar nature to the corpus; this helped to show how professional writers deal with thematic progression and organization (p. 20).

The result showed that professional writers thematized either discourse themes (e.g. for one thing, for another) or topical themes (e.g. he), and they used different thematic patterns to develop the topic. In the case of students' composition, they discovered a number of problems such as: over-use of constant progression, confusing selection of discoursal and topical themes, intervening material between mentioning in rheme and subsequent thematization, empty rheme (over-use of theme), brand-new theme and themes with unclear reference. The result also

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confirmed that the theme/rheme construct can be a valuable instrument for teachers when it comes to marking students writing (Belmonte & McCabe, 1998, p.25).

Kularb (2001) studied the discourse features regarding theme and rheme affecting student's paragraph writing. The study involved classroom observation, interview of the teacher and students and examination of nine students' written work. The finding reported that students have problems in both rheme and especially theme. These problems are the use of conjunctions, missing subject of the sentences, redundancy and mother language interference.

Ebrahimi (2008) conducted a study to find out the possible thematic organization and thematic progression patterns and their relation to students' level of language proficiency. For this aim, ninety male and female students majoring in English language translation in Abadan Islamic Azad University were selected. They were divided into three groups- sophomore, junior, and senior students. The three groups also sat for a homogeneity test (Fowler & Coe, 1976). Then three pictorial stories were used for gathering the data from the students. The data were analyzed based on Halliday (1985) and McCabe (1999) models of thematic organization and progression. The result suggested that theme and rheme patterning can be effectively applied in classrooms to help students in writing. Students will know where they are losing their effectiveness in their arguments due to problems with either thematic progression or thematic selection, or both.

Ren, Cao, and Li (2009) studied the thematic organization and progression in the college English writing. The result revealed that even if most of the students have improved their communicative abilities and expected to construct good compositions, but their writings were still loose in structure and disordered in logic; the whole texts lack unity. One of the major obstacles for the students in writing lies in the logical organization of the text content and the coherent layout of the textual structure. In addition, they also pointed out that, one reason behind this lack of unity is that teachers; excessive focus on grammatical mistakes. This misleads students to think that correct grammar is the primary factor in writing, which in turn, leads to the result that students pay too much attention to grammar instead of the rationality of organization and fail to make a coherent writing.

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Conclusion

The reviewed studies suggest that thematic structure is a highly effective and valuable technique in writing. It enhances connectivity between ideas in the text. These studies also propose that our understanding of how texts are created and interpreted would be much poorer without the concept of theme and thematic organization. In students' writings, theme – rheme patterns are important in guiding the reader through the logical paths constructed by the writer. If little attention is paid to these patterns, the writer's attempt to help readers to comprehend the text will be destroyed.

Teachers need to look beyond the traditional grammar of the clause when teaching writing, and teach students how to connect their sentences so as to produce a coherent and cohesive text. Based on the results gained from these studies, theme and rheme patterning can be effectively applied in classrooms to help students while writing. Being aware of these cohesive tools and thematic structures, students will know where they are losing their effectiveness in their arguments due to problems with either thematic progression or thematic selection, or both and can create cohesive composition in three ways: 1) by employing topical theme, the writer represents the propositional content, 2) by applying interpersonal theme, the writer exchanges structure, and expresses his or her attitude, and 3) by using textual theme, the writer can organize the message in the clauses, create texts, and set up a local environment in which the readers can interpret their message.

So, students must be trained in a way that they can create cohesive composition. They should be conscious that if they want to convey information effectively and successfully and to write cohesive composition, focus on the theme-rheme structure is very crucial, useful, and has an immediate result in writing.

Getting familiar with the thematic structures can help the readers to comprehend the text as well. The readers need to be aware of the way different thematic choices are realized in different texts. This awareness can guide them through the logical path constructed by the writers to

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comprehend the subsequent segment and help them to understand the text better, since the kind of meaning realized by thematic options may vary depending on the purpose of the writers.

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