Point of Departure in Texts Developed by Native and Non-native Writers

Seyed Foad Ebrahimi
Seyed Jamal Ebrahimi

==

Abstract

This study made frequency and functional analysis of point of departure in reading comprehension texts developed by native and non-native writers. Sixteen texts from four reading comprehension textbooks were selected and analyzed for the marked and unmarked point of departures. Differences between the two texts in terms of marked and unmarked point of departures were reported by the result. The result of chi-square test illustrated that these differences were not statically significant. This is justified in terms of genre similarity. The findings of this study are applicable in designing reading comprehension syllabus.

Key words: Reading comprehension texts, native and non-native writers, marked, unmarked

Introduction

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 5 May 2012
Seyed Foad Ebrahimi and Seyed Jamal Ebrahimi
Point of Departure in Texts Developed by
Native and
Non-native Writers 109

In reading comprehension classroom, texts are important since they are, according to Hutchinson and Torres (1994), "almost universal elements of teaching. Therefore, no teaching-learning situation is complete until it has its relevant text" (p. 315). In the same line of argumentation, Cunningsworth (1995) stated that texts have the potential for serving several additional roles in the ELT curriculum. Texts are effective resources for self-directed learning and for material presentation, sources of ideas and activities, and syllabuses where they reflect pre-determined learning objectives.

While developing texts, writers should pay great attention to the point of departure at the sentence and the text level. This area has been tackled by many researchers within last decades (Ventola, 1995; Idding, 2008; Jalilifar & Khedri, 2011; Agawa, 2004; Denardi, 2006; Whittaker, 1995; Ghadessy, 1999; Ebrahimi & Khedri, 2011; Martinez, 2003; Lores, 2004; North, 2005; Brown & Yule, 1983; Berry, 1989; Wang, 2007; Ebrahimi, 2008, Ebrahimi & Ebrahimi, 2012). The importance of point of departure originated from the fact that point of departure is one of the constraints on the speakers/ writers since they can produce only one word at a time while producing their messages. They have to choose a beginning point for their utterances in order to organize their messages. The initial point is important in the clause and also in the discourse. It influences the hearers/readers' interpretation of every thing that follows in the discourse since it constitutes the initial textual context for everything that follows. What is placed in this initial position is called point of departure or theme (Brown and Yule; 1983, p. 126). They use the term point of departure to refer to a formal category in the analysis of sentences or clauses in a complex or compound sentence. They assume that it is the left- most constituent of the sentence which has two important functions:

1. It maintains a coherent point of view by connecting back and linking into the previous discourse.

2. It serves as a point of departure for the further development of the discourse (p. 133).

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 5 May 2012
Seyed Foad Ebrahimi and Seyed Jamal Ebrahimi
Point of Departure in Texts Developed by
Native and
Non-native Writers 110

In the same line of argumentation, Halliday (1985) stated that if writers want to develop cohesive and easy to comprehend text, they should keep in mind the importance of the focus on the point of departure at the sentence and text level. Generally the first paragraph orients a reader to what the text will be about and predicts the topic sentence of each paragraph of the text. A topic sentence orients a reader to what a paragraph will be about, and it tends to predict the point of departure of the sentences in the paragraph. Point of departure of a clause orients a reader to the message in clause.

Taking the importance of point of departure in text development into account, this study attempted to investigate this cohesive element in the reading comprehension texts relaying on the categorization of clause point of departure proposed by Halliday (1985, 1994, 2004).

Corpus

This study was run on the corpus of sixteen texts extracted from four reading comprehension textbooks written by native and non-native writers of English. All the textbooks were used for teaching reading comprehension skill in EFL context.

Analytical Model

Halliday (1994) categorized point of departures in to marked and unmarked point of departures.
Unmarked point of departure: an element that occupies the point of departure position of the clause and conflates with the grammatical subject.

Example 1: Her picture was taken and posted on the internet.

Marked point of departure: an element other than occupies the point of departure position of the clause but does not conflates with the grammatical subject (p.44).

Example 2: Posted on some moblogs, you can find photos of friends making funny

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 5 May 2012
Seyed Foad Ebrahimi and Seyed Jamal Ebrahimi
Point of Departure in Texts Developed by
Native and
Non-native Writers 111

faces, photos from people traveling, and photos of new babies.

Unit of Analysis

This study adopted t-unit as the basic unit of analysis. T-unit is defined by Fries (1994) as a clause complex which contains one main independent clause together with all the hypotactic clauses which are dependent on it (p.318). The rationale behind this selection was that: Analyzing theme at the level of t-unit rather than the individual clause makes it easier to focus on patterns of thematic development in large amounts of text, and can also be justified on the grounds that the thematic structure of a dependent clause is often constrained by the independent clause. (Fries & Francis, 1992 as cited in North, 2005, p.6).

Procedure

At first the textbooks were collected and sixteen units from four textbooks were randomly selected. Second, the data were analyzed based on Halliday's (1985, 1994, 2004) categorization of point of departure, marked and unmarked. Third, the frequency of marked and unmarked point of departure in different textbooks was calculated. Finally, in order to see the relationship between the two groups of the texts regarding marked and unmarked point of departure, Chi-square was run on the data.

One problem with text analysis is that there is always the danger of making mistakes in interpretation. To increase the reliability in the analysis, two units from the corpus were also analyzed by an experienced researcher in applied linguistics and agreement was made on the method of analysis.

Result and Discussion

Table 1 show that both native and non-native writers dedicated small number of their point of departure to present marked point of departure. The result also reported that native writer applied marked point of departure twice of that applied by non-native

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 5 May 2012
Seyed Foad Ebrahimi and Seyed Jamal Ebrahimi
Point of Departure in Texts Developed by
Native and
Non-native Writers 112

writers. In case of non-native writers, the result was in line with earlier finding reported by Whittaker's (1995), Ghadessy (1999), and McCabe's (1999). In case of native writers, the gained result was compatible with North's (2005), and Coffin and Hewings (2005) findings. Coffin and Hewings (2005) found (18.82%) marked themes in the students' writings (p.158). North (2005), in her study of thematicity in essay writing, found that (17.08%) of the topical themes was marked (p.11). The difference between the two corpora indicates that texts developed by non-native writers were less argumentative in nature comparing to those developed by non-native writers.

The higher use of marked point of departure in texts written by native writers may indicate that while writing they took the deference between the definition and position of the point of departure in to account. Halliday (1985) asserts that point of departure can be identified as that element which comes in the first position in the clause, but this is not how the category of point of departure defined. The definition is functional, as it is with all the elements in this interpretation of grammatical structure. Point of departure is one element in a particular structural configuration which, taken as a whole, organizes the clause as a message.

This higher application of marked point of departure may root in the discourse function of marked point of departure. Looking at this point of departure from functional view point, native writers used this point of departure to put some elements that frequently indicate notions such as validation of internal evidence, location in discourse time or space, and writer view points into the point of departure position (Davies, 1988). These elements, often at sentences boundaries, commonly have the function of textual organization, like signaling changes and turns in real world and discourse circumstances. It is recognition of these internal signals that help identify the rhetorical moves outlined by Swales (1981, 1990) (Gosden, 1992)

The small percentage of this point of departure in the texts written by non-native writers could be sourced from that these writers, at least in this study, prefer to place

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 5 May 2012
Seyed Foad Ebrahimi and Seyed Jamal Ebrahimi
Point of Departure in Texts Developed by
Native and
Non-native Writers 113

theme in the subject position of the clause. This is the simple way of constructing canonical English sentences that follow NP VP pattern. This may also illustrate the lack of attention of these writers to the fact that point of departure is a powerful recourse to highlight adverbial or objects and that this fronting acts as the organizer of information in the sentence.

In both texts, unmarked point of departure outran marked point of departure in number which indicates that point of departure/subject compliance. This may also be indicative of structural simplicity of students' writings at different levels of language proficiency. According to Halliday (1994), unmarked point of departure is used in the text if there is no prior context leading up to it, and no positive reasons for choosing any thing else (p.33). This also gives continuity to the text because the rheme or point of departure of the previous t-unit is used in the point of departure position of the next clause and this connects the t-units together.

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Marked and Unmarked Point of Departure

	Non-native writers (%)	Native writers (%)
Marked	11 (8)	32 (16)
Unmarked	119 (92)	158 (84)

The chi-square result reported that the differences between the two corpora regarding marked and unmarked point of departure were not statistically significant. This similarity can be explained in terms of genre.

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976, 1985), texts belonging to the same genre represent a similar contextual configuration, that is, they show common characteristics in terms of field, mode, and tenor of discourse. As far as reading texts patterns the same family of genre, then this similarity in the reading texts is not surprising.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 5 May 2012
Seyed Foad Ebrahimi and Seyed Jamal Ebrahimi
Point of Departure in Texts Developed by
Native and
Non-native Writers 114

So similarities in field, tenor, and mode engender similarities in textual choices and are reflected in the point of departure choices preferred since the field, tenor, and mode can be realized in point of departure. Therefore, point of departure as one of the textual choices provides interesting insight into establishing similarities within and between genres. This is inline with other studies like Ghadessy (1995, 1999), North's (2005), and Whitaker's (1995) findings. These researchers suggested that different types of point of departures can reveal crucial characteristics of the texts regarding genre. The result of chi-square test is displayed in table 2.

Table 2 Results of Chi-square Test

	Non-native	Native	chi-square value	df	sig.
Marked	8	16	2.667	1	0.1025
Unmarked	92	84	0.364	1	0.5465

Conclusion

In reading comprehension classroom, we often find texts which are difficult to comprehend and not well organized. Since this problem could be due the textual resources of the text, this study aimed to shed the light on the marked and unmarked point of departure as one of those recourses used in reading comprehension texts written by native and non-native writers. The data analysis indicated that these points of departures were manifested in the texts written by both writers.

The higher frequency of marked point of departure in texts written by native writers may suggest that they relied on the idea stated by Gosden (1992) that using marked point of departure means bringing some elements into the point of departure position which commonly have the function of textual organization. These elements may signal changes and turns in real-world and discourse circumstances. It is by these

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 5 May 2012
Seyed Foad Ebrahimi and Seyed Jamal Ebrahimi
Point of Departure in Texts Developed by
Native and
Non-native Writers 115

elements that we could recognize the rhetorical structure of the text. The higher frequency of unmarked point of departure in texts developed by non-native writers illustrated that these texts included more simple sentences. The result of Chi-square analysis showed that the differences were not significant. This was explained in terms of similarity in genre.

The result of the present study will benefit the English students and language instructors in general and syllabus designers in particular. Point of departure awareness can help writers to create cohesive and well organized text. Generally speaking, this awareness can guide readers through the logical path constructed by the writers to comprehend the subsequent segment and help them to understand the text better.

===

References

Agawa, G.S. (2004) . Modeling reader-based prose: Topic development patterns in ESL readings. Reterived May 30, 2007 from: http// web1.hup.edu/images/studies/tesl/04Agawa-readability.

Berry, M. (1989). Thematic options and success in writing. In M. Ghadessy,(ed.) *Thematic development in English text* (pp. 55 − 84). London : Pinter

Brown, G. & Yule, G. (1983). *Discourse analysis.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cunningsworth, A. (1995). Choosing your coursebook. Oxford: Heinemann.

Coffin, C. & Hewings, A. (2005). IELTS as preparation for tertiary writing: Distinctive interpersonal and textual strategies. In L.J. Ravelli, & R.A Ellis, (eds.) Analysing academic writing (pp. 153 − 171). London : Continum.

Davies, F. (1988). Reading between the lines: thematic choices as a device for presenting writers viewpoint in academic discourse. *The Especialist,* 9(2), 173-200.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 5 May 2012
Seyed Foad Ebrahimi and Seyed Jamal Ebrahimi
Point of Departure in Texts Developed by
Native and
Non-native Writers 116

Denardi, D (2006). Cohesion and thematic structure: self-based analysis of academic Abstracts Theme, RetrievedMay18,2011, from: http:// www.ucm.es/ info/circulo/ no7/ mccabe.htm

Ebrahimi, S. F. (2008) *Thematic organization and thematic progression in Iranian EFL composition writing: Implication in teaching writing skill*. Unpublished master thesis. Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch Press: Ahvaz

Ebrahimi, S. F., & Ebrahimi, S. J. (2012). Cohesion in Iranian English textbooks . *Language in India*, 12(4), 87-99.

Ebrahimi, S.F., & Khedri, M. (2011).Thematicity in Research Article Abstracts: A cross Disciplinary Study. *Educational Quest, International Journal of Education and Applied Science*, 2(3), 1-6.

Fries, P.H, (1994). Theme, method of development, and texts. *World Englishes*, 21 (2), 317- 359.

Ghadessy, M. (1995). Thematic development and its relationship to registers and genres . In M. Ghadessy, (ed.) *Thematic development in English text* (pp. 129 – 126). London : Pinter

Ghadessy, M. (1999). Thematic organization in academic article abstracts. *Journal of Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad Complutense*, 7, 141-161 .

Gosden, H. (1992). Discourse functions of marked theme in scientific research articles. *Journal of English for Specific Purpose*s, 11, 207-224.

Halliday, M.A.K. (1985). *An introduction to functional grammar*, London: Edward Arnold.

Halliday, M.A.K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar (2nd ed.)*, London: Edward Arnold.

Halliday, M.A.K. (2004). *An introduction to functional grammar (3rd ed.)*, London: Edward Arnold.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 5 May 2012
Seyed Foad Ebrahimi and Seyed Jamal Ebrahimi
Point of Departure in Texts Developed by
Native and
Non-native Writers 117

Halliday, M.A.k. & Hasan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.

Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan, R. (1985). *Language, context, and text: Aspect of language in a social semiotic perspective.* Australia: Deakin University Press.

Hutchinson, T., & Torres, E. (1994). The textbook as agent of change. ELT Journal, 48(4), 315- 327.

Idding, J. (2008). A functional analysis of English Humanities and Biochemstry writing With respect to teaching university composition. *Journal of Novitas-ROYAL,*2(1),60-78.

Jalilifar, A.R., & Khedri, M. (2011). thematic development in English and translated Academic text. In A. R. Jalilifar and E. Abdollahzadah (Eds.), *Academic research genre in Asian context* , (pp. 335 – 364). Ahwaz: Shahid Chamran University Press.

Lores, R. (2004). On RA abstracts: from rhetorical structure to thematic organization. *Journal of English for Specific Purpose*, 23, 280-302 .

Martinez, I. A. (2003). Aspects of theme in the method and discussion sections of biology journal article in English. *Journal of English for Academic Purpose*, 2, 103-123

McCabe, A. (1999). *Theme and thematic patterns in Spanish and English history text.* Doctorial dissertation, Aston University: Aston.

North, S. (2005). Disciplinary variation in the use of theme in undergraduate essays. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 26 (3), 1-18.

Ventola, E. (1995). Thematic development and translation. In M. Ghadessy,(Eds.) *Thematic development in English text* (pp. 85 – 104). London : Pinter.

Wang, L. (2007). Theme and rheme in the thematic organization of text: Implication for teaching academic writing. *Asian EFL Journal*, 9 (1), 1-11.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 5 May 2012
Seyed Foad Ebrahimi and Seyed Jamal Ebrahimi
Point of Departure in Texts Developed by
Native and
Non-native Writers 118

Whittaker, R. (1995). Theme processes and the realization of meaning in academic
   articles. In M. Ghadessy,(ed.) *Thematic development in English text* (pp. 105 –
   128). London : Pinter

===

Seyed Foad Ebrahimi
Department of English
Shadegan Branch, Islamic Azad University
Shadegan
Iran
Seyedfoade@yahoo.com

Seyed Jamal Ebrahimi
Department of English
Shadegan Branch, Islamic Azad University
Shadegan
Iran
Jetco2003@yahoo.co.uk

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 5 May 2012
Seyed Foad Ebrahimi and Seyed Jamal Ebrahimi
Point of Departure in Texts Developed by
Native and
Non-native Writers 119