# Developing Theme and Rheme in Expository Writing: A Case Study

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# DEVELOPING THEME AND RHEME IN EXPOSITORY WRITING: A CASE STUDY

## ABSTRACT

Teaching writing to non-native speakers of English demands much more than appropriate sentence construction and grammar.   Writing at the tertiary level involves thinking in the English way.   The aim of this paper is to examine and identify the weaknesses of theme and rheme in the clause as message following the tradition of Hallidayan linguistics.   The research has identified the non-existence of theme, disguised theme and the lack of bond between the theme and rheme in a longitudinal case study. This action research proposes strategies in overcoming such weaknesses in language and thought.   Among the strategies are the basic matching activity, the examination and analyses of academic texts and teaching the learner to monitor the theme and rheme from sentence to sentence and more importantly to focus on the theme.   The results can be seen after six months when the learner is able to express himself/herself cohesively and meaningfully in discourse.

## INTRODUCTION

The teaching of writing has to be a long and individual process for foreign language learners of English.   Much individual attention is set aside to find out the weaknesses of the students.   A major weakness, from the examination of the essays of a particular student, is the theme-rheme structure of the clause from the semantic perspective.   The theme comes first in the sequence of elements of theme and rheme in the constructions of sentences.   The research has identified the non-existence of theme, disguised theme and the lack of coherence between theme and rheme in a case study.

## THE SUBJECT

The subject had completed 11 years of English instruction from the primary to the high school.   The teaching of English was completely focused on English grammar – the teaching of its rules.   And the mother tongue (Mandarin) was used to teach the English grammar. There was hardly any use of English in the classroom or outside the classroom.   The subject spent a year in Beijing Jili University to study English.   And then he completed the Foundation Course, CIMP, in Malaysia.   The subject achieved a band of 6.5 in IELTS.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In writing essays, a sound understanding of the structure of the English sentence is necessary. The basic structure of the sentence comprises the three parts: the subject, the verb and the rest of the sentence or S-V-ROS. Of major concern in this study is the 'subject'. The subject is the label for a grammatical function of the sentence from a structural perspective. There is more than one interpretation of the subject. The subject can be defined as the part of the sentence that is the concern of the message. It can also be interpreted as the doer of the action.

From the terminology of the Prague School, the term 'Theme' functions as the element that serves as the point of departure of the message. It sets and delimits the clause within its context. The rest of the message is called the Rheme where the Theme is developed. From a Hallidayan perspective, the clause is the central processing unit in the lexiogrammar of the language. The clause manifests the different kinds of meanings that are mapped into an integrated grammatical structure. Halliday further developed the concept of Theme:

> The Theme is what is being talked about, the point of departure
> for the clause as a message: and the speaker has within certain
> limits the option of selecting any element in the clause as thematic.

> (1967c, 212)

Taking stock of the theories governing the subject of the sentence, this study would embark on a thinking based on the theme-rheme structure. In writing, meanings are actually expressed and the theme-rheme concept lends itself to be meaning oriented. And the sentence would be determined as a clause as it is linguistically oriented.

## THE STUDY AND FINDINGS

The subject completed writing 48 essays in six months. The length of each essay was about one-and-half pages. On average, the subject attempted two essays per week. The topics of the essays are associated with social issues, business matters and scientific subjects. From the essays, particularly from those in the first twenty, there were confusing expressions at the starting point of clauses. On closer examination, the study determined the following weaknesses:

### Absence of Theme

The writer has not focused on what he is going to stay at the starting point of the message. In an English clause, it is typical to state the Theme of the message. The Theme can be a thing, someone or an act. The absence of theme can be seen from these four examples:

(a) Actually, rather saying to help the community, not to say that help the domestic people.

 (b) The public image even decide the survivor from today's competition.

(Topic: Should business people help the community?)

(c) According to various cases show that people who have the social relationship with different sex take more attention on opposite sex feelings than those who do not have and they can be sensitive to each other during the relationship.

(Topic: Is relationship necessary between boys and girls in the university?)

(d) Because it is seldom found female CEOs are shown on the list of the Fortune 500 companies.

(Topic: Women make better business people than men.   Do you agree or disagree with this statement?

In clause (a), the meaning of the clause is unable to be determined.   The Theme has not been initially declared.   In fact, the whole clause does not convey any form of meaning.   The same can be said of clause (b).   In clause (c), the writer attempts to state the Theme but loses it in the midst of other ideas with the result that the Theme is not apparent. The initial part of clause (d) does not state what the writer is going to propose.   'It' has no anaphoric reference.

**Disguised/Vague/Non-explicit Theme**

The writer has not precisely or explicitly stated what he has to say at the onset of the message.   It is generally observed that the initial parts of the clauses are wordy or full of expressions without being explicit.   The key expressions have not been conceptualized at the beginning.   The following clauses reflect vagueness and non-explicitness at the onset:

(e) For example, the difference between men and women in terms of the characteristics is that men tend to be more mentally acting and women tend to be emotionally acting which means men judge the situations by facts and truths, however, women judge the same situations by their feelings.

(f) When it comes to parenting, especially parents handle the problem about the fighting between children.

(Topic: Many people believe that women make better parents than men and that is why they have the greater role in raising children in most societies.   Others claim that men are just as good as women at parenting.   Present a written argument or

case to an educated reader).

 (g) Secondly, the comfortable lifestyle since motor vehicles have been invented years ago, the convenient transportation changes people's lives.

(Topic: The younger generation today tends to be obese.   Discuss this statement).

Disguised, vague or non-explicit themes are much more apparent in the subject's writing in comparison with the absence of themes.   In clause (e), the writer is unable to determine specifically the Theme of his message. It sounds more appropriate to focus on the idea 'mental versus emotional' rather than 'the difference'.   The same weakness is found in (f) where the writer is unable to determine what he is going to talk about is 'fighting'.   In clause (g), the writer experiences the same difficulty.

**Incoherent Tie between Theme and Rheme**

From the research evidence, the writer is unable to establish the logical tie between the Theme and the Rheme.   The writer could sometimes declare the Theme appropriately but the foregoing Rheme does not convey any meaning to the preceding information. The following examples from the writer are highlighted:

(h) This set custom has been practised throughout the western communities, people's daily life even in the marriage.

(Topic: Asian men   make better   husbands than Caucasians.   Do you   agree or disagree with this statement?)

(i)  In sum, it is unacceptable for formal examination assessing students' ability because of formal examination cannot assess students' ability, the assessment completely depends on students' feeling on that particular day, and students will concern about exam rather than understanding the content.

(Topic:   In the past 20 years, the assessment of students has undergone major transformation.   Many educational institutions no longer use formal examinations as a means of assessment as they believe formal examination results are an unfair indication of a student's ability.   To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?   Give reasons for your answer).

In clause (h), the Theme 'set custom' has been identified followed by a Rheme 'throughout the western communities' that is acceptable.   However, the writer has continued to introduce another Rheme that has caused confusion.   In clause (i), the Theme is appropriate but the Rheme is garbled with much detail.   Perhaps the

writer could have stated the conclusion in this way: In sum, it is unacceptable to assess a student's ability in formal examinations because of the reasons discussed in the essay.

## Action-research

Acknowledging that there is a writing weakness in this particular student, a plan or methodology needs to be instituted and put into place. Such a plan is referred to as action-research that is 'the application of fact-finding to practical problem-solving in a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it' (Burns, 2000). The action-research focuses on one basic characteristic and that is 'situational' – diagnosing a problem in a specific context and attempting to solve it in that context (ibid. p. 44). With this in proper focus, a writing programme is initiated and designed.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology in this writing programme is directed at removing a particular writing weakness of the subject. The subject has to be taught what the Theme of a clause is. He has to be clear and precise to what he is going to say at the beginning of the clause. The methodology also comprises the teaching, learning and practice of the following:

1. The three parts of the clause
2. The Theme and the Rheme
3. The coherence between the Theme and the Rheme (matching activity)
4. Examining academic texts with special focus on Theme and Rheme (reading)
5. Writing short essays
6. Correcting essays – special attention on Theme and Rheme

### Matching Activity

The subject must realize that the Theme and Rheme have to be coherent. To do so, a series of exercises can be used to sharpen the tie between the Theme and the Rheme. A matching activity is exemplified below:

A university education …

(i) makes students forget about the poor and the world
(ii) has the potential to make people think for themselves
(iii) is an institution that makes money for all

Of course, the most appropriate answer is (ii). The other options do not cohere with the stem. Alternatively, the Rheme can be provided and the subject has to select one of the Themes that match with the Rheme. Another activity is to provide the Theme orally and then the subject has to immediately respond with an appropriate Rheme.

**THE RESULT**

With these reinforced activities, the subject is seen to improve in the construction of the theme-rheme structure.   Towards the last two months of the writing programme, the subject is able to produce clauses that reflect clearer Themes.   The following examples from the writer testify to this:

1. First of all, people do business in the market under certain rules.   The rules are applied to protect people's basic rights.

(Topic: Why must business students study business law?)

2. Euthanasia is morally justified.   Sometimes patients who are terminally ill will suffer unnecessary and unjustified pain.

(Topic: Should euthanasia be practised?)

3. In conclusion, intermarriage may not be the solution to racial harmony in the world.   But it does provide one avenue for the challenge of stereotypes.

(Topic: Intermarriage is a solution to racial harmony in this world.   What are your views on this claim?)

4. It is absolutely true that business is about people

5. Setting a good public image is a way to attract customers as well.

(Topic: Business is about people.   Without people, there is no business.   Discuss).

6. English is important for China. Not only English is a significant language which should be used all over the world, it is also the key to obtain the world's technological advancement.

(Topic: Is English important for China?)

7. Traditionally, marriage was not an option for people.   People had to get married because their parents said so.   Nowadays, marriage may no longer be necessary for all of us.   There is a choice.

(Topic: Is marriage a choice?)

8. Saving plays an important role in people's life, especially when people encounter some unexpected dangers.   Extra money always brings people out of the horrible situation.

(Topic: Should people develop the habit of saving?)


**CONCLUSION**

Every student has different weaknesses in writing.   In order to remove these weaknesses, time and effort must be put aside to be with the student.   It is a long and tedious process to provide individual attention but it is rewarding and satisfying.

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