

THE ANALYSIS OF THEMATIC PROGRESSION IN EVALUATING EFL WRITING

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Abstract: There have been efforts to solve students's problems of writing difficulties in EFL class. However, the investigation on the features of the students's written discourse regarding the Thematic Progression is rarely done. The present study aims to explore that the notion of thematic progression can be helpful as an important tool at the level of discourse for the teacher to evaluate EFL writing. The focus in the study is to answer several research questions in which involving the thematic progression, and textual cohesion and coherence in EFL writing. To address this issue the writers have analysed a sample of 20 compositions written by students learning English as Foreign language in term of their thematic progression. The data for this investigation were collected through interview, classroom observation, and the review of students' written works. This analysis has enabled the writers to find the common problems they had for textual cohesion and coherence in EFL writing.

Keywords: *Theme, Rheme, Thematic Progression*

Introduction

Recently, research based on the construct introduced by the proponents of the systemic functional grammar has proliferated in recent years. Since M.A.K Halliday, whose contribution to linguistics in the form of systemic functional grammar has influenced on the way language is looked at, Theme has been widely studied to be an important cohesive device at dicourse level (Belmonte and Hidalgo, 1997; Leonard and Hukari, 2005). A strong line of investigation has been related to the concept of Theme and its development in different types of texts. The strength of this investigation comes from the fact that Theme – Rheme plays a significant role in the creation of texture and structure of the message and in enabling it to be effectively communicated and clearly understood. This insight forms an important part in this paper that is “the textual function of the clause is that of constructing the message and Theme-Rheme is the basic form of the organization of text a message (Halliday, 2004).

In this paper the writer tries to prove that the notion of Theme-Rheme is helpful in the comprehension and production of text and, therefore, it can be useful as a tool of instruction for the teacher to evaluate English as foreign language writing at the level of discourse. To test this hypothesis the writer has analyzed a sample of 20 students compositions written by Unswagati students of English department at first grade.

Theme-Rheme and Thematic Progression

The definition of Theme given by Halliday (2004) is that Theme is given information serving as “the point of departure” of a message. The given information is the information which has already been mentioned somewhere in the text, or it is shared or mutual knowledge from the immediate context. In other words, Theme typically contains familiar, old or given information. In simple terms, then, a clause begins with a realization of the Theme. This is followed by the realization of the Rheme, which can be explained as being the rest of the message.

Based on the statements above, Theme functions as the starting point for the message, the element which the clause has a crucial effect in orienting listeners and readers. Theme is the starting point of the clause, realized by whatever element comes first, and Rheme is the rest of the message, which provides the additional information added to the starting point and which is available for subsequent development in the text. The different choice of Theme has contributed to a different meaning and English uses first clausal position as a signal to orient a different meaning of the sentences.

Theme	Rheme
The lion	beat the unicorn all round the town
However, the unicorn	still did not want to bow to the lion
The lion	decided to beat him to death
Would the unicorn	give in to the lion
When the lion got to the battle field	the unicorn was ready for the battle

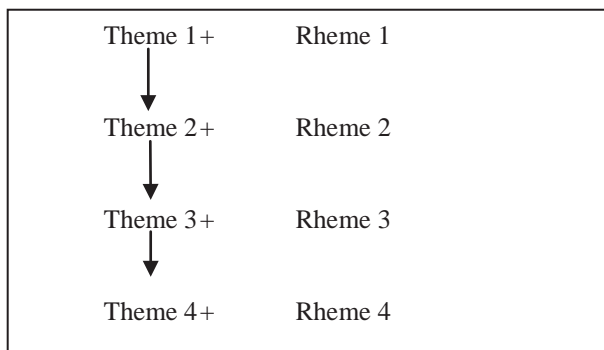
The example of Theme-Rheme System

Our approach to the notion of Theme will be discourse oriented, that is, we are most concerned with the role Theme fulfill in the structuring and development in discourse , as opposed to just sentences.

Bloor and Bloor (2004) explain the extention of the concept of Theme as point of departure of a single utterance (sentence) to that of explaining the inner connexity is represented, among other things, by **Thematic Progression**. A text may be organized in terms of Thematic Progression. Thematic Progression concerns the ways the texts develop the ideas they present. The selection of Theme for any individual clause will commonly relate to the way information is being developed over the course of the whole text. The organization of information in texts is determined by the progression in the ordering of utterance themes and their Rhemes. From Bloor and Bloor, it can be concluded that Thematic progression refers to how cohesion is created by placing elements from the Rheme of one clause into the Theme of the next, or by repeating meanings from the Theme of one clause in the Theme of subsequent clauses.

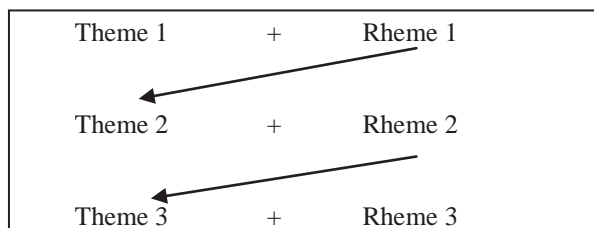
Below are 4 main types of thematic progressions identified in Bloor and Bloor (2004) which may occur in a text. They are *The Constant Theme pattern*, *The Linear Theme Pattern*, *The Split Rheme pattern*, and *Derived Themes*.

The constant theme pattern is a pattern where a common Theme is shared by each clause and this Theme equates with given information. This pattern keeps the same Theme in focus throughout a sequence of clauses. Information is built up in the Rheme of each clause.



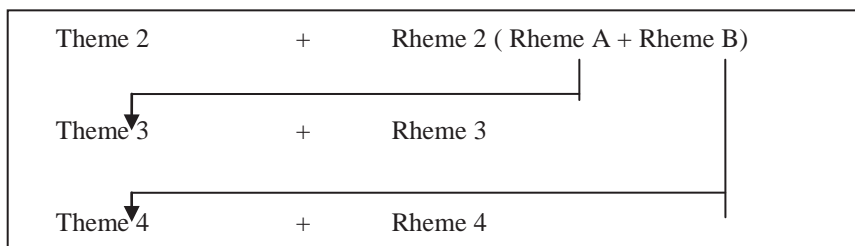
Constant Theme Pattern

The second type of thematic progression is *The Linear Theme Pattern*. In this type, the Rheme of one clause is taken up as the theme of the subsequent clause.



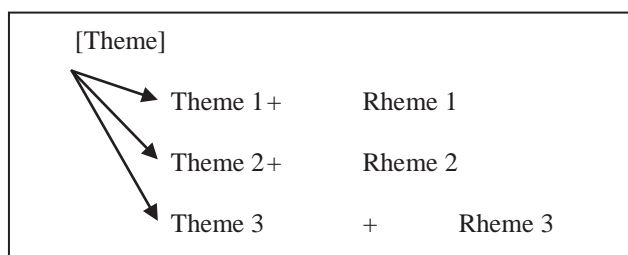
The Linear Theme Pattern

The third common type of Thematic Progression dealt with here is known as the Split Rheme Pattern. This Pattern occurs when the Rheme of a clause has two components, each of which is taken in turn as the Theme of a subsequent clause.



The Split Rheme Pattern

In *Derived Themes*, the passage text as a whole concerns a single general notion. The Themes of the various constituent clauses all derive from that general notion, but are not identical to one another.



Derived Themes Pattern

Summarizing after a review of the most relevant functional literature on the Theme-Rheme construction, we have centered our research on a cognitive-oriented discourse characterization of Theme. We consider Theme is the point where the thought in the speaker's mind meets with the preceding discourse. In the next explanation we will demonstrate the usefulness of Theme-Rheme construction for teacher through analysis of a sample of student compositions in English.

The Analysis

In the development of student writing, Theme and Rheme can be key in maintaining coherence in textual organization. By engaging the students in well defined discourse analysis of a successful writing text, then applying the same analysis to their own, students can see for themselves where their writing might be lacking organization and, more importantly, where their text shows signs of organization and development.

The writer analyzed 20 student compositions written for a Test of EFL writing in term of Thematic Progression. The test is a 60 minute written essay in developing a topic. It is scored holistically, and development of ideas, organization, and language are given equal weighting. The topic of the essay is : Living in a new place.

Through the writer analysis, it is found a number of problems related to Thematic Progression. These problems are explained below.

1. Less variety in Theme

One problem the writer found was the less variety of Theme. The following example is the composition written by the student that shows the problem. In this student's paragraph, most of her sentences are started with conjunctions. From this problem, the teacher can encourage the student to think about expanding her ideas in the paragraph, really developing the argument she was making. The teacher can show how thinking about the Themes in the paragraph could help.

Text 1

Big city and small town is different place to live. For instance, in a big city where I live now, it is very crowded. While a small town, the place where I lived before is so quiet. Besides, living in the big city requires more energy. Because it is very busy place to live. We have to work hard there. Meanwhile living in small town is not like that. We may not need to work all day long even at night. Moreover, we often eat junkfood everyday because we dont have time to cook. Even, we also have very limited time to do exercise or maybe we become lazy to exercise. As a result, we become fatter and easy to be sick...

Learning from this problem, the teacher can make the students aware that not each sentence needs to start with a conjunction, and that when using conjunctions, they should make logical connections between sentences.

2. Over-use of Constant Theme pattern

The second problem the writer dicovered was the over-use of Constant Theme pattern, where many clauses of the text share the same Theme. In these case, the text is created like a list, and there is lack of simple linear or split rheme pattern. It shows that the student tends not to go into depth on the idea introduced in the text by not explore more information introduced in the Rheme. From this problem, the student can be helped to generate more idea to write about. Below is a student composition that gives clear example of this problem.

Text 2

I just moved overseas to continue my study. *I* live in a big city. *I* have to know how to survive in my new condition. *I* live here with high cost and *I* have to work hard to survive. *I* feel it's different with the place where I lived before. *I* didn't need to cook, because *I* just have to wait until my mother served the meal for me. *I* also had a plenty of sleep there. Here, *I* have to make my own meal. *I* also spent more hours to work, so that *I* just have little time to sleep....

Facing this problem, the teacher can also do other activities include having students expand on text by adding simple linear development to text consisting of only constant Theme pattern, or providing text in which the Rheme of some of the clauses have been grapped out.

Conclusions

The results confirmed that Thematic Progression can be a valuable instrument for the teacher to evaluate students' writing. It allows them to focus on the level of the text. The notion of Thematic Progression can also provide material for classroom activities which student will then be able to draw on when writing their composition.

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