Theme-Rheme patterns in L2 writing[1]

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Resumen

En los últimos años, se han publicado en lengua inglesa un gran número de estudios funcionales sobre los conceptos Tema y Rema y su papel como elemento de cohesión textual (Fries, 1981; Martin, 1992, 1995, entre otros). Sin embargo, se ha dedicado mucha menos atención al estudio de su utilidad en la enseñanza de segundas lenguas. Nuestro principal objetivo en este artículo es demostrar la conveniencia de aplicar las nociones de Tema y Rema a la enseñanza de una lengua extranjera, especialmente como herramienta para evaluar de una forma sistemática, y no de manera meramente intuitiva, el nivel de dominio de la producción escrita de un alumno. Para ello, hemos estudiado la selección y la progresión temática en una muestra de 25 composiciones escritas por estudiantes españoles de inglés como segunda lengua. Este análisis nos ha permitido descubrir algunos problemas recurrentes relacionados con la falta de coherencia y cohesión textual en la expresión escrita en L2.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Análisis del discurso. Cohesión textual. Didáctica del Inglés como segunda lengua (ESL).

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Abstract

The Theme/Rheme construct has been widely studied in English over the last few years proving to be a very important cohesive element at discourse level (Fries, 1981, 1992, 1994, 1995; Martin, 1992, 1995, inter alia). However, researchers have paid much less attention to this construct and its possible usefulness in second language teaching. This paper's main aim is to prove that the notion of Theme/Rheme can be very helpful as a tool of instruction for the teacher to evaluate L2 writing at the level of the discourse. To address this issue, we have analyzed a sample of 25 student compositions written by Spanish native speakers learning English as a second language in terms of their Thematic selection and progression. This empirical analysis has enabled us to uncover several common problems for textual cohesion and coherence in L2 writing.

KEY WORDS: Discourse analysis. Textual cohesion. English as a Second Language (ESL).

Résumé

Dans les dernières années, de nombreuses études théoriques ont été publiées en anglais sur le concept de Thème/Rhème et son influence comme facteur de cohésion du discours (Fries 1981; Martin 1992, 1995, etc.). Cependant, sa possible utilité dans l'ensignement des secondes langues a été trĕs étudiée.

La but principal de cet article est de démontrer la convenance d'incorporer la notion de Thème/Rhème dans l'enseignement des langues étrangères, et surtout comme outil du professeur pour lui permettre d'évaluer d'une manière systématique, et non pas seulement par intuition, le niveau de production écrite des élĕves. Pour ce faire, nous avons analysé la sélection et la progression thématique dans un échantillon de compositions écrites produites par des élèves espagnols étudiant l'anglais comme langue étrangère. Cette analyse nous a permis de découvrir des problèmes communs ayant trait au manque de cohérence et de cohésion textuelle dans l'expression écrite des secondes langues.

MOTS CLÉS: Analyse du Discours. Cohésion textuelle. Enseignement de l'anglais comme langue étrangère (ESL).

1. Introduction

Over the last few years, Theme has been widely studied and proved to be a very important cohesive element at the level of discourse (Fries, 1981, in press, 1992, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Martin, 1992, 1995; *inter alia*). For M.A.K. Halliday, whose contribution to linguistics in the form of systemic-functional grammar is having a profound effect on how language is looked at, and whose insights in this area form a very important part of this paper, *"the textual function of the clause is that of constructing a message"* and the Theme/Rheme structure is the *"basic form of the organization of the clause as message"* (Halliday, 1985: 53). Also, for Halliday the *"basic unit of language in use is not a word or a sentence, but a <text>"* (Halliday, 1970: 160).

However, many ESL writing teachers, upon receiving their students' compositions, still focus their feedback to learners on errors which occur below the clause level, such as lack of subject-verb agreement, incorrect use of verb tenses, and so on. While this focus has recently broadened somewhat to the discourse level through areas of inquiry in ESP (Swales, 1982, 1990; Johns, 1986; Canseco & Byrd, 1989) and in Contrastive Rhetoric (Kaplan, 1966; Connor and Kaplan, 1987), many writing instructors still feel the lack of tools necessary to analyze their students texts at the discourse level.

In this paper we will attempt at proving that the notion of Theme/Rheme is highly useful in the comprehension and production of texts and, therefore, it can be very helpful as a tool of instruction for the teacher to evaluate L2 writing at the level of the discourse. To test this hypothesis, we have analyzed a sample of 25 student compositions written by Spanish native speakers learning English as a second language in terms of their Thematic selection and progression. As this is a preliminary study, we are well aware of the limitations of the corpus size. However, it has enabled us to uncover several common problems for textual cohesion and coherence in L2 writing.

2. Towards a discourse definition of Theme

In any act of communication, organization is a major problem which must be solved if the communication is to be successful. One of the constraints on speakers/writers when producing their message is that they can produce only one word at a time. Therefore, they have to choose a beginning point for their utterance. The initial place has an enormous importance in the clause and also in discourse. Whatever is chosen to be in first place will influence the hearer/reader's

interpretation of everything that comes next in the discourse since it will constitute the initial textual context for everything that follows.

It is in initial position of the clause in SVO languages where formal categories such as *Theme, Topic, Grammatical Subject* and *Given (recoverable) information* usually come together. A review of the relevant literature on the subject proves that there is a great deal of confusion among all these terms: it is very common to read research papers about these linguistic phenomena in which different terminology is used. Let us try then to clarify the notion of Theme and provide a definition of it from a functional perspective.

In this investigation, Theme is considered to be a structural category realized by clause initial position in English and different from Topic and Given information (Halliday, 1970; Fries, 1981; Downing, 1991; *inter alia*), although they may be conflated and thus represented by the same element in the clause. Accordingly, Topic is a non-structural discourse category which describes what a text is about (Brown and Yule, 1983; van Oosten, 1986) and Given/New information is a structural category realized in English by focus placement in tone units (Halliday, 1967, 1985; Downing & Locke, 1992). We will provide an example to illustrate this:

> (1)
> CHESTER PAST
> (1) *Chester's history* stretches over 2000 years *and* (2) *all the dramatic events that shaped the destiny of Britain* are etched immortally into the vary fabric of its heritage.
> (3) *In 79 AD*, the Roman Empire built Fortress Deva as a frontier outpost to suppress Welsh tribes.
> (4) *Three centuries later*, the legions were recalled to protect Rome. (5) *Britain* plunged into the Dark Ages *and (it)* was plundered by invaders from across the North Sea. (6) *Before long*, Vikings landed on the shores of Chester...
> (7) *In the 10th century*, Aethelfaeda, daughter of King Alfred the Great, established Chester as a fortified town, strengthening and extending the City Walls to defend the citizens against Viking hordes...

The example (1) above is a fragment of a narrative text in which Temporal Themes are predominant. We can see how the constituents selected as Themes in each clause —signaled in the examples by numbers and highlighted by italics— do not coincide either with the discourse Topic of the text *(Chester's history)* or with the grammatical Subject *(the Roman Empire; the legions; Aethelfaeda...)* and do not contain recoverable information for the reader.

Over the last few years, the traditional sentential characterization of Theme as *"the point of departure of the clause"* (Halliday 1967, 1970, 1985) has been extended and completed by a cognitive discourse-oriented one which considers

Theme's main function to *signal the relationship between the thought in the speaker's mind and its expression in discourse* (Vasconcellos, 1992:147), that is, speakers/writers choose one element or another for thematic position based on the thought they wish to express and on how they wish to connect that thought to the surrounding text. This same conception is shared by Bloor and Bloor when they state that Theme in English is *the idea represented by the constituent at the starting of the clause* (1995:72).
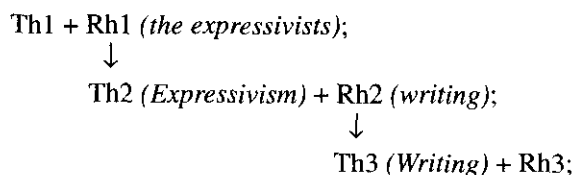
However, from the point of view of L2 writing instruction, we are not so interested in the actual individual choices of Themes, but rather in the sequences of thematic and rhematic choices which create certain kinds of thematic patterning. Therefore, our approach to the notion of Theme will be discourse-oriented, that is, we are most concerned with the role Theme fulfills in the structuring and development in discourse, as opposed to just sentences. In this line, Frantisek Danes and later on, Peter H. Fries have claimed that the way in which lexical strings and reference chains interact with Theme is not random; rather the patterns of interaction realizes what they refer to as a text's THEMATIC PROGRESSION (Danes, 1974) or METHOD OF DEVELOPMENT (Fries, 1981). By thematic progression, Danes means *"the choice and ordering of utterance Themes, their mutual concatenation and hierarchy, as well as their relationship to the hyperthemes of the superior text units (such as paragraph, chapter...). to the whole of text, and to the situation"* (Danes, 1974: 114). He proposes the following major patterns of thematic progression:

A) **simple linear progression,** where an item from the Rheme of the first clause becomes the Theme of the subsequent clause:
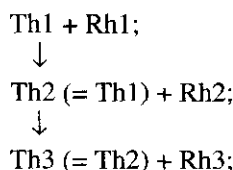
$$Th1 + Rh1;$$
$$\downarrow$$
$$Th2 (= Rh1) + Rh2;$$
$$\downarrow$$
$$Th3 (= Rh2) + Rh3;$$
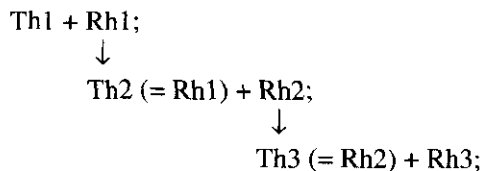
Example (2)

> (1) *Faigley* (1986) identifies two groups within the process came, the expressivists and the cognitivists. (2) *Expressivism* reached its zenith in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the individual expression of honest and personal thought became a popular trend in teaching writing. (3) *Writing* was considered "an art, a creative act in which the process —the discovery of the true self— is as important as the product -...".

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{Th1 + Rh1 } \textit{(the expressivists)}; \\ \qquad \downarrow \\ \text{Th2 } \textit{(Expressivism)} \text{ + Rh2 } \textit{(writing)}; \\ \qquad\qquad\qquad \downarrow \\ \text{Th3 } \textit{(Writing)} \text{ + Rh3}; \end{array}$$

We can see in this example that the writer introduces the idea of *Expressivism* through the use of the related word *expressivist* in the Rheme of Clause 1. Then she uses this idea as the Theme of Clause 2. In Clause 2, the Rheme includes the idea of *writing*. This then becomes the Theme of Clause 3.

B) **constant progression,** where the item in the Theme of the first clause is also selected as the Theme of the following clause:
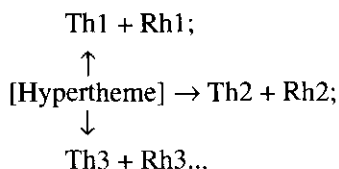
$$\begin{array}{l} \text{Th1 + Rh1}; \\ \quad \downarrow \\ \text{Th2 (= Th1) + Rh2}; \\ \quad \downarrow \\ \text{Th3 (= Th2) + Rh3}; \end{array}$$

Example (3)

> (1) *The Themes* chosen by the speaker may, for example, refer to place (in this country) or time (in the last century); (2) *they* may indicate when the speaker is about to express an attitude (in my opinion) or give an example (for example); (3) *a Theme* may even begin a rhetorical question (What are we going to do about the lack of values?).
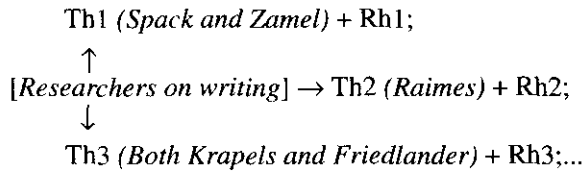
$$\text{Th1 = Th2 = Th3}$$

In this case, the authors take as the Theme of each sentence the same or similar idea, that of *Theme*.

C) **derived hyperthematic progression,** where the particular Themes in subsequent clauses are derived from a *hypertheme* or from the same overriding Theme:

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{Th1 + Rh1}; \\ \quad \uparrow \\ \text{[Hypertheme] } \rightarrow \text{Th2 + Rh2}; \\ \quad \downarrow \\ \text{Th3 + Rh3...} \end{array}$$
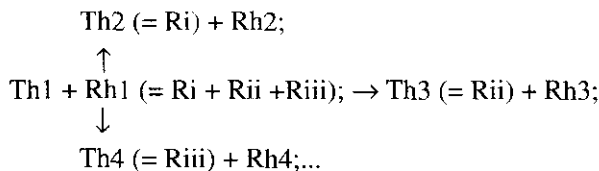
Example (4)

> (1) *Spack (1984) and Zamel (1983),* studying ESL writers, corroborated Hayes and Flower's findings about the writing process for their populations. (2) *Raimes (1987: 459-460)* compared ESL students' composing processes with other researchers' findings on L2 basic writers, and concluded that the two groups of students had much in common. (3) *Both Krapels (this volume) and Friedlander (this volume)* continue the discussion of ESL writing process research.

$$Th1 \ (Spack \ and \ Zamel) + Rh1;$$
$$\uparrow$$
$$[Researchers \ on \ writing] \rightarrow Th2 \ (Raimes) + Rh2;$$
$$\downarrow$$
$$Th3 \ (Both \ Krapels \ and \ Friedlander) + Rh3;...$$

In this example, we can see that each individual clause Theme is different; they each refer to a different person. However, they are all related under the hypertheme of *researchers on writing.*

Danes' theory of Thematic Progression has been applied in several descriptive studies to different text types (Dubois, 1987; Giora, 1983; Weissberg, 1984; Maynard, 1986; Curzon, 1984; *inter alia*). To Danes' three types of progression has been added a fourth:

D) split progression, where the Rheme of the first clause is split into two items, each in turn being then taken as a Theme element in the subsequent clause:

$$Th2 \ (= Ri) + Rh2;$$
$$\uparrow$$
$$Th1 + Rh1 \ (= Ri + Rii + Riii); \rightarrow Th3 \ (= Rii) + Rh3;$$
$$\downarrow$$
$$Th4 \ (= Riii) + Rh4;...$$

Example (5):

> (1) *The textual Theme* is any combination of (i) continuative, (ii) structural and (iii) conjunctive, in that order. (2) *A continuative* is one of a small set of discourse signalers, yes, no, well, oh, now, which signal that a new move is beginning: a response in dialogue, or a move to the next point if the same speaker is continuing. (3) *A structural Theme* is any of the obligatorily thematic elements...

Th2 *(A continuative)* + R2;

↑

Th1 + Rh1 (= Ri *[continuative]* + Rii *[structural]* + Riii *[conjunctive]*);

↓

Th3 *(A structural Theme)* + R3; ...
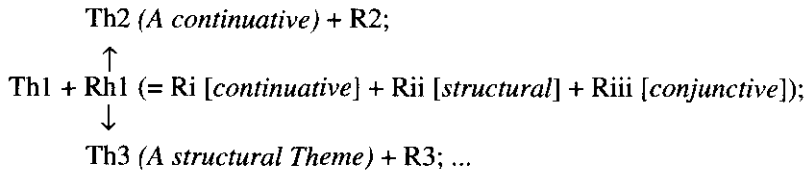
In this example, the author introduces three ideas in the Rheme of Clause 1. In Clause 2, he chooses as a Theme one of the ideas from the previous Rheme, that of *continuative.* In Clause 3, the Theme is a second idea from Rheme 1, that of *structural.* And we can imagine that in a subsequent clause, he will pick up on the third idea mentioned in Rheme 1, that of *conjunctive.* So we can see here how ideas introduced in a Rheme of one clause can be split up and developed by becoming the Themes of different subsequent clauses.

Summarizing, after a review of the most relevant functional literature on the Theme/Rheme construct, we have centered our research on a cognitive-oriented discourse characterization of Theme. We believe Theme is the point where the thought in the speaker's mind meets with the preceding discourse and initiates *"the semantic journey"* (Davies, 1997) throughout the discourse. In addition, we have shown in this section that Theme plays a very important role in the structuring of discourse and should be taken into account by teachers of L2 writing. In the next section we will demonstrate the usefulness of the Theme/Rheme construct for teachers through analysis of a sample of student compositions in English.

3.   The corpus

We analyzed 25 student compositions written for a mock T.W.E. (Test of Written English) exam in terms of Thematic selection and progression. The T.W.E. exam is a 30 minute written essay in response to a prompt, which involves students in giving their opinion on an issue. It is scored holistically, and development of ideas, organization, and language are given equal weighting; if a writer is strong in one area, that can raise his/her overall score, thus making up for weaknesses in another area. The T.W.E. prompt asks the students to take a position on a given issue; our corpus consists of answers written in response to the following prompts:

1) *Is higher education a right or a privilege?*
2) *Agree or disagree with the following statement: Teachers should make learning enjoyable for their students.*

All the essays were written by students at an American University in Madrid; the majority were written by native speakers of Spanish.

4. The analysis

The first part of the analysis consisted of carrying out a study of Theme selection and Theme progression on 40 professional texts of a similar nature to our corpus; that is to say, the texts involved the writers in defending a position on a given issue. This showed us that professional writers tend to thematize either Discourse Themes, as illustrated in the following example:

(Example 6)

> *Clearly, the argument that marijuana —or heroin, methadone, or morphine— is prohibited because it is addictive or dangerous* cannot be supported by facts. *For one thing, there* are many drugs, from insulin to penicillin, than are neither addictive *nor dangerous but are nevertheless also prohibited: they can be obtained only* through a physician's prescription. *For another, there* are many things, from poisons to guns, that are much more dangerous than narcotics (especially to others) but are not prohibited. (...)

or Topical Themes, as illustrated below:

(Example 7)

> *The history of the present King of Great Britain* is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. *To prove this,* let facts be submitted to a candid world:
> *He* has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.
> *He* has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance (...)
> *He* has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people (...)

As to Thematic Progression, argumentative texts are characterized by high proportions of cross references from the Rheme of one sentence to the Theme of the next and, in fact, the texts analyzed show a tendency to intertwine different Thematic patterns, in order to develop the topic in full.

The second part consisted of analyzing the students' compositions, comparing them with the professional texts. Through our analysis, we discovered a number of problems related to either Thematic selection, Thematic progression, or both. These problems are explained and illustrated below.

4.1. *Over-use of constant progression*

One problem we found was the over-use of the constant Theme pattern, where many clauses of the text share the same Theme. In these cases, the text often reads like a list, and, as there is a lack of simple linear and/or split Rheme development, the writer tends not to go into depth on the ideas introduced in the text by not expanding on information introduced in the Rhemes. Pointing this out to students can help them discover how they can generate more ideas to write about. A fragment below of a student composition (Text #2) is a clear example of this. The topic is not developed at all through the Rhemes, as there is a lack of further development of Rhemes:

(Text #2)

(1) *Higher education* is both a right and a privilege. (2) *It* makes people be more busy avoiding the boredom of stay at home without working. (3) *However, it* orders you to work overtime. (4) *Furthermore, it* provides you the chance of having a more important job although it is difficult to finish college having enough knowledge to begin to work. (5) *You* have to pay a lot of money (6) *but you* will be able to obtain more money when you are working. (7) *In addition, it* brings you the opportunity of meeting people;...

4.2. *Confusing selection of Discoursal and Topical Themes*

A second problem was a confusing selection of both Discoursal and Topical Themes. If the Discoursal Themes chosen are not clear, readers can easily lose their way through the text; thus, the writer is not effective in guiding the reader with adequate signals. If the choice of Topical Themes is confusing, the reader may not know what the discourse referent is. Or it may mean that the writer is jumping from one idea to another, again without making clear connections between the Themes chosen, making the text hard to follow. We can see this in Text #7 below, especially in the choices of Discourse Themes. There is a *First of all* in Clause 1 with no corresponding *Second,* yet there is a *First* in Clause 7, which is followed by two *Seconds,* one in Clause 8 and the other in Clause 11. The confusion for the reader is that it is natural to want to consider the *Second* of Clause 11 as following from the *First of all* of Clause 1. It takes some concentration and deciphering on the part of the reader to determine that this is not the case. (As an example of how the student could have better utilized the Theme position of the clauses, see Appendix 1 for a rewrite.)

(Text # 7)

(1) *First of all, we* should define higher education. (2) *I* think that most people would describe it as the education received at the universities, the courses that people choose freely that prepare them for their future jobs. (3) *Therefore, carreers like law, Medicine and Architecture* would be considered as higher education. (4) *Many times, we* have heard people argue that higher education is a right and other times a privilege. (5) *For me, personally, higher education* is always a right, (6) *and I* feel this way for two principal reasons. (7) *First, the Spanish Constitution* recognizes education as a right for all. (8) *Second, each individual* deserves the right *to discover his potential.*

(9) *The Spanish Constitution (as most of Constitutions around the world)* recognizes the education as a right. (10) *Therefore, every person independient of his race, social condition or ideology,* can study the carreer considered by him to be most suitable according to his talents and tastes.

(11) *Second, I* believe higher education serves as an instrument which allows a person to realize his potential. (12) *He* will have more culture the more he studies. (13) *The result* is a more specialized society in every proffesion, and a higher cultural level in general.

(14) *In conclusion the goverment* must work hard to see that everybody receives a good higher education.

4.3. *Intervening material between mention in Rheme and subsequent thematization*

A third problem we found was a large stretch of text between a concept mentioned in a Rheme and its subsequent placement in Thematic position. This forces the reader to peruse back through the text at length in order to find the previous mention. It also indicates a lack of a clear plan of development, as if the writer decided at a later moment to tack on an additional comment to something mentioned earlier in Rheme position, rather than developing that idea at the time it was introduced into the text. This can be seen in Text #17 below. The writer introduces the concept of *actitude* in the Rheme of Clause 5. He later picks up on this in Clause 10. This subsequent development of the idea of *actitude* could have been better included after its introduction in Clause 5.

(Text # 17)

(1) *Teachers* should make learning enjoyable and a different activity for their students. (2) *University classroom* is not only formed by a lecturer. (3) *He* also have students that in a common sense form a whole group. (4) *By the way, students* are also responsible on the development of the class, because they can decide go on a particular way; (5) *I* mean with this that the student is responsible on the half part or 50% to give a enjoyable lecture with the participation and his own actitude. (6) *Second, teachers* should cooperate and give motivation to their students to

participate during the lecture. (7) *In addition, there* are other activities to do on an extra-scholarship manner that also contribute to have a enjoyable learning. (8) *In this type of activities* both teacher and students are responsibles of the result.
(9) *Actitude* is essential to give good results on this third way. (10) *Both actitude*s form this relation. (11) *The best actitude do you have,* the more frienship and the best lecture both (teachers and students) can have....

4.4. *The empty Rheme*

A fourth problem in our corpus involves what Bloor & Bloor (1992) term *the empty Rheme.* An example of this is from Text #1, in response to the prompt *"Is higher education a right or a privilege?"*. The student begins with:

> *Nowadays,* higher education is a huge question (...).

The Rheme is empty of any conceptual content. A possible rewording for this could be:

> Whether higher education should be considered a right or a privilege is a controversial issue (...).

The writer can then expand on the controversy in the subsequent clause.

4.5. *Over-use of* There

A fifth problem is that of over-use of *There* in the Theme selection. In fact, in this same text, Text #1, the writer used *There* in Thematic position a total of 5 times out of 22 clauses, often focusing on information in the Rheme which could have been selected for Theme position, thus providing for smoother progression, and for consistency in the method of development. For example, look at the following set of clauses:

> (...) (15) *In some families* the student have to be at home to help his parents because they are ill. (16) *There* are too families who have personal problems...

where Clause 16 could be changed to read:

> (16) *Other families* have personal problems...

4.6. *Brand New Theme*

The sixth problem is related to the second one above, that of confusing Topical Themes. In this case, the writer introduces too many new Themes, or the problem of Brand New Theme (Bloor and Bloor, 1992). While this may not be a cause for confusion for the reader, it can be the source of two problems. The first of these is that the new Themes may be connected to the overall text, but in a tenuous way, thus forcing the reader to make the conceptual connections. Also, the introduction of too many Brand New Themes is usually an indication that the writer is not developing adequately any of the ideas introduced, as also happens with over-use of constant topic Thematic Progression. This is illustrated below with Text #3. The topical Themes are plotted below, making evident the introduction of new Themes into the text.

(Text #3)

(1) *A higher education* is a right (2) *but sometimes* is a privilege. (3) *It's* a privilege because the majority of universities are so expensives (4) *and all people* don't have enough money to go there. (5) *I* know that studies are a constitutional right, because it says all people are the same under law and all people have the same rights".

(6) *Not a lot of people* have money to pay the university, (7) *for this reason, the rest of them* don't go there. (8) *I* guess there are a lot of people that they want to finish the higher education (9) *and they* have the right to have an opportunity. (10) *There* are a lot of inteligent people that they can't go (11) *and they* don't obtein "becas". (12) *This* is the most important reason which I say that studies or to go to a (higher) University is a privilege for people that can pay the tuition.

(13) *My position* is that the goverment can get more "becas" for this people. (14) *To do that,* they have to change a lot of things (15) *but I* think this isn't a problem. (16) *I* know that they'll have to spend a lot money to do bigger the space because the universities are very small to all people. (17) *All of us* can change that, (18) *now to* go to the university is a privilege, (19) *but in few years* can be a right again.

(20) *Our world* is crazy, (21) *nobody* know to do. (22) *There* are rich people that they don't want study and (23) *there* are poor people that they want study (24) *but they* can't. (25) *Nobody* are conformed with the things they have...

4.7. *Themes with unclear reference*

The seventh problem involves use of Themes with unclear reference, and can be divided into two categories. First of all, there often exists an over-use of pronouns, mainly personal pronouns and indefinite pronouns. This is a feature more commonly found in the spoken language, as the speakers can identify the referents by using many other cues, such as gestures. Many students use conversational *you* when talking about people in general, although at times it can

seem to be used to refer to the reader. Also, these student writers often switch from giving Thematic focus to *I* to *we* to *you,* which is obviously not an effective method of development for written texts. A second related problem is over-use of indefinite *it.* This is clearly seen in the sample of student text below:

(Text #16)

> ... (4) *We* might have the last word to make our study hours amusing, (5) *but, it's* so different when we are learning to enjoy what we are being taught by someone who nows how to encourage our interest. (6) *Some classmates* expect a showman instead of a teacher or a friend who can be treated in times with no respect and (7) *that* is why some teachers also, seem to be going to war, and be giving class to a bunch of hooligans instead of just normal and not "so" predictable "brats". (8) *It's* difficult to avoid stereotyping, and to maintain calm when a subject becomes almost impossible to understand, (9) *but there* is still a chance to overcome the struggle and succeed, (10) *it's* only a mind's game (as a famous commercial says)...

In Clause 5, the student uses as Theme *it,* which has no clear referent. The same thing happens in Clause 10.

5.   Conclusions

Although we are fully aware of the limitations of our corpus, we have carried out a preliminary study of student writing using as a tool for analysis the Theme/Rheme construct. The results confirm that the Theme/Rheme construct can be a valuable instrument for teachers when it comes time to marking student writing. It allows them to focus on the level of text, and to thereby explain to students where they are losing effectiveness in their arguments due to problems with either Thematic progression or Thematic selection, or both. In addition to equipping teachers with an effective tool for marking compositions, the notions of Thematic progression and Thematic selection can also provide material for classroom activities, which students will then be able to draw on when writing their compositions. Some sample activities can be found in Bardovi-Harlig (1980). Other activities include having students expand on texts by adding simple linear development to texts consisting of only constant topic progression, or providing texts in which the Rheme of some of the clauses have been gapped out, and so on.

In our opinion, teachers of writing need to look beyond the traditional grammar of the clause when evaluating student writing, and to make room for looking at patterns at the level of discourse. We feel that this can be done using concepts from functional grammar, specifically in this case patterns of Theme and Rheme.

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APPENDIX I

Text # 7: Suggested Rewrite
In the problem section of this paper, we saw in the example that the student used a confusing system of discoursal topic as Theme. The following rewrite shows how this could be improved. It also shows how the student could move to Theme position items which he had originally placed in Rheme position. The rewrite allows for greater cohesion of the text.

(1) *First of all, higher education* needs to be defined. (2) *It* can be defined for the most part as the education received at the universities, the courses that people choose freely that prepare them for their future jobs. (3) *Therefore, careers like law, Medicine and Architecture* would be considered as higher education. (4) *Secondly, whether higher education is a right or a privilege* is a controversial question. (5) *Personally, for me higher education* is always a right, (6) *and I* feel this way for two principal reasons. (7) *First, education as a right for all* is recognized in the Spanish Constitution. (8) *Second, an additional right that everyone has* is to discover their potential.

(9) *The Spanish Constitution (as most of Constitutions around the world)* recognizes education as a right for everyone. (10) *Therefore, every person independent of race, social condition or ideology,* can study the career considered by him/her to be most suitable according to his/her talents and tastes.

(11) *Furthermore, higher education* serves as an instrument which allows people to realize their potential. (12) *The more people study,* the greater the level of culture they will have. (13) *The result of this* is a more specialized society in every profession, and a higher cultural level in general.

(14) *In conclusion, because the right to receive a good higher education belongs to everyone,* the government must work hard to see that everybody receives a good higher education.

Th1 = THEME, Rh-question (higher education)
Th2 = Th1 (It)
Th3 = Rh2 (careers like law, Medicine and Architecture)
Th4 = Th2, THEME (Whether higher education is a right or a privilege)
Th5 = NEW, but refers to purpose of essay (For me)
Th6 = Th5 (I)
Th7 = THEME, T4 (education as a right for all)
Th8 = Th7 (an additional right that everyone has)
Th9 = Rh7 (The Spanish Constitution (as most of Constitutions around the world))

Th10 = Rh9 (every person independent of race, social condition or ideology)

Th11 = THEME higher education

Th12 = THEME (The more people study)

Th13 = CLAUSE 12 (The result of this)

Th14 = THEME and SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT (because the right to receive a good higher education belongs to everyone)