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Cohesion in Iranian English Textbooks

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Abstract

Thematic organization plays a major role in the organization of the text and in enabling it to be communicated and understood clearly. One issue in textbooks writing is how the writers deal with this textual feature. This study made frequency and functional analysis of thematic organization in Iranian English textbooks used for teaching Pre-requisite, English for General Purposes and English for Specific Purposes courses at Iranian universities at B.A level. For this aim, twelve units, from six textbooks were randomly selected. Then the data were analyzed based on thematic organization model proposed by Halliday's (2004). The results showed that there is thematic development exist in case of simple, unmarked, and marked themes in Iranian English textbooks. This study may have implication in syllabus designing and reading comprehension.

Keywords: Theme, Rheme, Thematic Organization, English Textbooks

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Introduction

In the EFL context, we see that learners often have problem in comprehending the reading materials. One reason behind this could be that these texts consist of sentences which do not seem to connect together into a cohesive text. Traditionally, cohesion has often been neglected in written texts, where sentences have been created, manipulated, and assessed in isolation. Only from the mid 1970s onwards, did it become progressively assumed in teaching reading and writing that a coherent text is more than a series of grammatical sentences lined up one after another; rather, they interlace, each sentence building on the preceding ones while at the same time advancing the discourse.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) argue that a text can not be regarded as coherent unless it fulfills two points. One of these two points is texture; the concept of texture is entirely appropriate to express the property of being a text. A text has texture and this is what distinguishes it from something else other than the text. As pointed out by Halliday and Hasan (1976), texture consists of structural and non-structural aspects. The former refers to inter-sentence or intra-sentence structures like theme/rheme structure, whereas, the latter refers to the cohesive ties between different elements in different sentences like references, substitutions, ellipses, and conjunctions. As with Halliday and Hasan (1976), Belmont and McCabe (1998) assert that one way of achieving cohesion in text is through thematic organization, which involve the relationship between clauses based on the information contained in their themes and rhemes.

Halliday (1994, p.38) defines theme as the element in a particular structural configuration taken as whole, organizes the clause as a message; this is the configuration theme and rheme. Based on this definition a clause is made of two parts theme followed by rheme. Theme is the starting point for the message; it is the ground from which the clause is taking off. Theme helps us to know what the clause will be about and what is going to tell us. He also gave two examples to show the importance of theme in the meaning of the clause.

1. A halfpenny is the smallest English coin.
2. The smallest English coin is a halfpenny.

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In the first sentence, theme is “*a halfpenny*” this means the writer wants to tell us about “*a halfpenny*” but in the second sentence, the theme is “*the smallest English coin*” this means the writer wants to tell us about “*the smallest English coin*”.

Studies on Themes

A number of researchers have conducted studies on themes in different texts and have substantiated the facilitative role of thematic structure. To name some, Ebrahimi and Khedri (2011) analyzed this structure in the research article abstracts from two disciplinary of Applied Linguistics and Chemistry. Ebrahimi (2008) studied theme manifestation in the EFL students’ composition writing. North (2005) used systemic functional approach to analyze essays written by students from different backgrounds. Ventola (1995) studied thematicity in German philosophy texts produced by German authors and their parallel texts in English, the translation. Jalilifar and Khedri (2011) scrutinized thematic development and progression in English academic texts and their translations in Persian applying Halliday's (1994) thematic organization and McCabe's (1999) thematic progression models.

Even though previous studies analyzed thematic structure of different texts, but to the existing literature, little works have been done in EFL contexts in general and Iran in specific. Therefore this study seeks to find out the theme types applied in Iranian English textbooks taught at Iranian universities at BA level through three types of courses including Pre-requisite, English for General Purposes (Henceforth EGP), and English for Specific Purposes (Henceforth ESP), and the possible relationship between these textbooks regarding theme types and patterns

Method

Corpus

This study was conducted on the corpus of twelve randomly selected units from six textbooks each two from one course. These textbooks were selected owing to their availability to the researcher. In order to achieve the highest point of reliability and validity of data also control the

researcher bias in textbooks selection, those books which widely taught at Iranian universities and published by famous publications in Iran were selected.

Analytical Models

In order to achieve a well-organized study, Halliday's (2004) model of thematic organization which includes: Topical, Textual, Interpersonal, Simple, Multiple, Marked, and Unmarked patterns was used. The rationale behind this selection was that this model is the most plausible and updated analytical model.

Halliday (2004, p. 68) categorized 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 (2004) 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.

For example: and, the servant was waiting for the cats.

textual topical

The other categorization made by Halliday (2004) is marked and unmarked theme.

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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.

Unmarked

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.

For example: in the morning, the goat went to jungle to find the wolf.

marked

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 widely taught books were collected and twelve units from six books were randomly selected. Second, the data were analyzed based on Halliday's (2004) model thematic organization. Third, the frequency of theme types in different text books was calculated. Finally, in order to see the relationship between text books regarding thematic organization types, Chi-square was run on the data.

One problem with textual 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

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analyzed by an experienced researcher in applied linguistics and agreement was made on the method of analysis.

Result and Discussion

To identify the types of thematic organization in Iranian English textbooks, the data were analyzed and classified based on the aforementioned model suggested by Halliday (2004) and results were presented in table 1. Then, to see the relationship between textbooks regarding thematic organization types, Chi-square was run on the data, and results were presented in table 2 as well.

As shown in table 1, textual theme was used more than interpersonal theme. This gained result was compatible with those of Coffin and Hewings (2003), Ghadessy (1999), McCabe (1999), and North (2005). This overuse of textual theme is not surprising since there are plenty of conjunctions, coordinators and subordinators functioning as textual theme (Ghadessy 1999). The frequency analysis showed this theme is used in EGP textbooks more than other two textbooks. As far as this theme acts as a link which specifies the relationship of the clause to the surrounding text and context and also provides more explicit guidance to the reader on how to construct a coherent interpretation of the text, therefore this may result in more cohesion in EGP textbooks.

Concerning English textbooks, the reasons behind the low proportion of interpersonal theme in the analyzed data could be that when more than one interpersonal theme appears, only one attitude is emphasized; this is not the case with textual theme. Here it is possible to find two textual themes; one internal, giving information about the organization or function of part of the text, the other external, expressing logical relations which hold in the world. Other reason could be that where the interpersonal stance is signaled by pronouns such as “I” and “We” in theme position it will be categorized as topical not interpersonal theme. The result also declared that ESP textbooks used less interpersonal theme among the three textbooks. This may be because of

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the nature of ESP texts in which the writers may have information that the reader does not have, and thus the writers are not attempting to persuade the reader to agree with his statements, since they present the bulk of their statements as factual.

The result of Chi-square showed that there was no significant difference concerning textual and interpersonal themes in Iranian English textbooks. This means that these themes were treated the same in the textbooks. These similarities can be explained and justified in terms of genre. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), 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 (p. 46). As far as academic textbooks have the same family of genre, then this similarity in the textbooks is not odd.

So, similarities in field, tenor, and mode engender similarities in textual choices and are reflected in the thematic choices preferred since the field, tenor, and mode can be realized in topical, interpersonal, and textual themes respectively. Therefore, theme as one of the textual choices provides interesting insight into establishing similarities within and between genres. This is in the same line with what obtained by Ghadessy (1995; 1999), and North (2005). These researchers suggested that different types of theme can reveal crucial characteristics of the texts regarding genre.

Simple and Multiple Themes

In case of simple and multiple themes, the number of simple theme was about two to three times more than that of multiple theme supporting Ghadessy's (1999), and Coffin and Hewings's (2005) findings. Ghadessy (1999) used the theme/rheme system of Halliday to uncover the thematic organization of 150 academic article abstracts and found that the number of simple topical theme was greater than multiple topical theme. This meant that there were no overt textual and/or interpersonal elements in the majority of the themes in his data (p.150). This finding is also compatible with Ghadessy's (1995) finding. Generally speaking, the low proportion of multiple themes in Iranian English textbooks might reduce continuity in the texts,

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and failure to persuade reader to read. Within the gathered data, ESP textbooks used less multiple theme (%6) comparing to other textbooks. This could be due to that, ESP textbooks writers only simplify the original text, and may be when the text goes through a simplification process textual and interpersonal theme dropped, changed, or multiplied. Writers used multiple theme more in pre-requisite textbooks, which means these texts were written with a greater rhetorical awareness and writers wanted to add textual theme and, to some extent, interpersonal theme to topical theme to create continuity and cohesion in the text. Multiple theme in texts result in cohesive text in which there are several cohesive elements that at the same time they signal the thematic perspective of the sentence. So multiple theme is used to make several discourse relations at the same time. As far as multiple themes generally contribute to cohesion, so in the case of Iranian textbooks, pre-requisite were more cohesive.

The result of chi-square in terms of simple theme showed a significant difference between the three textbooks. There was a increase of use of simple theme in the textbooks from pre-requisite with (%73) to ESP textbooks with (%92). This result suggested simplicity in the ESP textbooks. Simple theme use makes a text that lack in continuity between the sentences because in such text there is no textual or interpersonal theme to create connection between the sentences.

Analyzing the data in light of marked and unmarked themes, results indicated that unmarked theme outran marked theme in number which clarified that topical theme occupy both thematic and subject positions. Theme/subject compliance may also be indicative of structural simplicity of textbooks. This result was in the same line with Ghadessy's (1999), and McCabe's (1999) findings, and in contrast to North's (2005), and Coffin and Hewings (2005) findings. The low portion of the marked themes in Iranian English textbooks shows that these texts are less argumentative in nature.

Preference for Unmarked Themes

By using unmarked more than marked theme, it seems that, in Iranian English textbooks, writers prefer to place theme in the subject position of the clause. In Halliday's (1994) view, unmarked

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theme 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). The other reason could be that by putting theme in subject position writers could make sure that their sentences are grammatically correct. This is the simple way of constructing canonical English sentences that follow NP VP pattern, owing to the fact that non-native textbooks writers' ability is far from native speaker writers' ability. One more reason could be that unmarked theme gives continuity to the text because the rheme or theme of the previous t-unit is used in the thematic position of the next clause and this connects the t-units together.

Table 1: Thematic Organization Types in English Textbooks

	Textual	Interpersonal	Simple	Multiple	Marked	Unmarked
Pre-requisite	11(% 14)	11(% 14)	56 (%73)	20(%27)	72(%94)	4(%06)
EGP	16 (%21)	10(%13)	56 (%75)	18(%25)	65(%85)	11(%15)
ESP	10 (%06)	6 (% 03)	139 (%92)	12(%08)	125(%83)	26(%17)

Table 2: Chi-square Analysis of Thematic Organization Types in English Textbooks

	Textual	Interpersonal	Simple	Multiple	Marked	Unmarked
Frequency	11 16 10	11 10 6	56 56 139	20 18 12	4 11 26	72 65 125
Chi-square value	1.669	1.554	54.885	2.084	18.480	24.654
d.f.	2	2	2	2	2	2
Sig.	0.4340	0,4594	0.001	0.3528	0.000	0.000

Conclusion

Halliday and Hasan (1976) suggest that a text can not be regarded as coherent unless it fulfills two points. One of these two points is texture; the concept texture is entirely appropriate to express the property of being a text. A text has texture and this is what distinguishes it from something that is not a text. Texture, as Halliday and Hasan (1976) argue, consists of structural and non-structural aspects. Nonstructural texture refers to the cohesive ties between different elements in different sentences like reference, substitution, ellipses, and conjunction. Yet structural texture refers to inter-sentence or intra-sentence structures like theme/rheme structure.

A focus on theme and rheme structure in a clause can have startling and immediate results in cohesion of the text. Writers can consciously and strategically draw on this knowledge to construct cohesive in their texts. The cohesion in the texts can be improved dramatically if attention is given to thematic selection and thematic progression in texts. The relationship between theme and rheme is essential in creating a cohesive writing. Thus, the insights gained from theme and rheme pattern are valuable in writing cohesive texts.

Yan, McDonald and Musheng (1993) state that if theme is defined as the point of departure of the message, then its significance can only be understood by seeing how it contributes to the progress of the message in texts. From this point of view, we can see the theme/rheme structure of each clause as textually motivated, organizing the text as a whole (p. 241). So the knowledge of thematicity helps the text coherence.

The aim of this study was to find out the thematic organization types used in English textbooks, Pre-requisite, EGP, and ESP, taught in Iranian universities at B.A. level, and the possible relation between these textbooks.

The data analysis indicated that different types of thematic organization patterns (textual, interpersonal, simple, multiple, marked, and unmarked) were used in the textbooks. The frequency of interpersonal, unmarked, simple, and multiple themes was different across the three textbooks. These differences were attributed to textbooks' different levels. The Chi-square analysis of textual, interpersonal and multiple themes showed no significant difference between

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the three textbooks. This means that these themes were treated somehow similar in the three textbooks. These similarities may attribute to the shared genre. Other studies proved that analysis of different types of theme provides some crucial characteristics of the text regarding genre, since theme as one of the textual choices provides interesting insights into establishing similarities within and between the genres.

The results suggest that thematic organization is a highly effective and valuable technique in creating cohesion in the text. It enhances connectivity between ideas in the text. The result also suggested that our understanding of how texts are created and interpreted would be much poorer without the concept of theme and thematic organization. In text's writing theme – rheme patterns are important in guiding the reader through the logical paths constructed by the writer. If little attention is paid to this pattern, the writer's attempt to help readers to comprehend the text will be destroyed. Theme and rheme progression patterns can improve text cohesion. The result also suggests that theme and rheme patterning can be effectively applied in reading comprehension.

The results of the present study will benefit the text books writers in EFL context in general and Iranian EFL textbooks writers in particular. Theme awareness can help writers to create cohesive texts in three ways: 1) by using topical theme, the writer represents the propositional content, 2) by using 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.

Writers should keep in mind that if they want to convey information effectively and successfully and to write cohesive texts, a focus on the theme-rheme structure is very important and has an immediate result in textbooks writings. If writers take into account how to arrange the old and new information in their texts, they would be able to write cohesive texts. The notion of theme can show writers how to write effectively by paying attention to the first paragraph, the topic sentence of each paragraph, and the theme of a clause. Because 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 themes of the sentences in the paragraph. Theme of a clause orients a reader to the message in clause.

The present study can also help the readers to comprehend the text. 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 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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