Thematic Progression in Iranian English Textbooks

Seyed Foad Ebrahimi
Mohsen Khedri

==

Abstract

This study made frequency and functional analysis of thematic progression patterns 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. To this end, twelve units, from six textbooks were randomly selected. Then the data were analyzed based on thematic progression model proposed by McCabe (1999). The data analysis reported significant differences in the three textbooks regarding linear progression and miscellaneous patterns. This study may have implication in syllabus designing and reading comprehension.

Keywords: Theme, Rheme, Thematic Progression, English Textbooks

Introduction

Traditionally, cohesion has often been neglected in writing texts, where sentences have been created, manipulated, and assessed in isolation. Only from the mid 1970s onwards, did it become

progressively assumed 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 thematic organization and thematic progression structures, 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 progression, 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.

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".

The notions of thematic structure have been studied by many researchers in recent years. Most have addressed this issue across such different genres as different languages (Ventola, 1995;

Jalilifar & Khedri, 2011); various disciplines (Whittaker, 1995; Ghadessy, 1999; Ebrahimi & Khedri, 2011); within discipline (Martinez, 2003; Lores, 2004; Jalilifar, 2010); essay writing (North, 2005); and composition writing (Wang, 2007; Ebrahimi, 2008). Yet, despite a sustained interest in studying theme, little research has examined thematic progression in English textbooks. This scarcity is felt more when it comes to thematic progression in Iranian EFL academic contexts. Therefore, bearing the important essence of thematic progression; the crucial role that it plays in the cohesion of the texts; and also extremely low done studies in this area of research in mind, this study aims to scrutinize the status of thematic progression in Iranian English textbooks taught at Iranian universities at B.A. level for Pre-requisite, English for General Purposes (EGP), and English for Specific Courses (ESP), and the possible relation between these textbooks.

The reasons behind putting thematic progression in focus are as follows: 1) thematic progression frequently links a clause to the proceeding clause (Hawes & Thomas, 1997), 2) it is a useful guide to the rhetorical path that the writer is following (Bloor & Bloor, 1995), and 3) it helps in creating cohesive text (Belmonte & McCabe, 1998).

Method

Corpus

This study was carried out on a corpus of 12 units which were taken from six textbooks, two from each of Pre-requisite, EGP, and ESP. The rationale behind the textbooks selection was that these textbooks are widely taught at Iranian universities and they are published by famous publications.

Analytical Model

The notion of thematic progression was introduced by the Prague Linguist, Danes (1974), in order to conceptualize the role of theme in text organization and construction. Danes points out that the choice of themes of individual messages in a text is not a matter of chance-is not random and without structural connection to the text. Danes' model was developed by McCabe (1999). She developed a number of types of thematic progression (TP) that manifest differently in

different genres including linear TP, constant TP (or thematic iteration), split theme TP, and split Rheme Progression.

A) Linear TP

McCabe (1999) refers to this as the most elementary or basic thematic progression, where the item in the Rheme of first clause becomes the Theme of the subsequent clause, as represented in Figure 1.

$$T1 \rightarrow R1$$
$$\downarrow$$
$$T2(=R1) \rightarrow R2$$
$$\downarrow$$
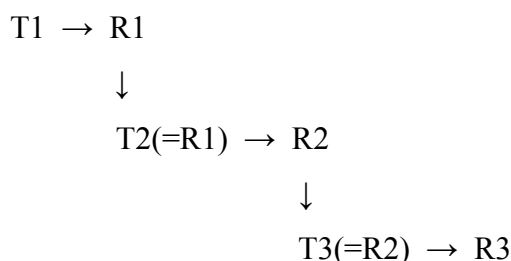$$T3(=R2) \rightarrow R3$$

Figure 1 linear TP

Example: "On the other day, the mouse went to the shoemaker. The shoemaker accepted to sew his tail if the mouse brings him some sewing-cotton from the carpet maker. The carpet maker listened to the mouse's story and promised to help him".

B) Constant TP

In this pattern, the item in the theme of the first clause is also selected as the theme of the following clause, though not necessarily with identical wording. It is represented in Figure 2.

$$T1 \rightarrow R1$$
$$\downarrow$$
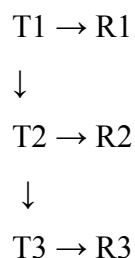$$T2 \rightarrow R2$$
$$\downarrow$$
$$T3 \rightarrow R3$$

Figure 2 constant TP

Example: "The children saw the black feet of the wolf and feared, and they did not open the door. They told the wolf that you are not our mother".

C) Split Theme TP

This pattern is characterized as the thematic progression where the item in the theme of the first clause functions as a hyper theme, as an element from which the theme of the subsequent clauses is derived. It is represented in Figure 3.

$$[T]$$

$$T1 \rightarrow R1 \qquad T2 \rightarrow R2 \qquad T3 \rightarrow R3$$
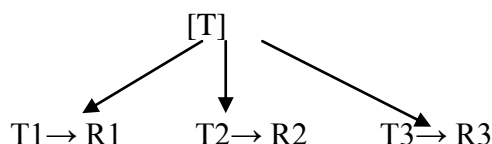
Example: "The mother and the child made a plan. She first found the wolf and tore his stomach, and the child brought some stones to fill the wolf's stomach".

D) TP with a split Rheme

In this pattern, the rheme of the first clause is split into two items, then each in turn being taken as a theme element in subsequent clauses. It is represented in Figure 4.

$$T1 \rightarrow R1 \quad (=R'2 + R''1)$$
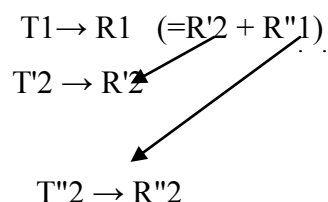$$T'2 \rightarrow R'2$$

$$T''2 \rightarrow R''2$$

Figure 4 TP with a split Rheme

Example: "Once upon a time there was a goat that lived with her children. The goat wanted to go to buy some food. The children promised her that they won't open the door for the wolf".

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 textbooks were collected and twelve units from six books were randomly selected. Second, the data were analyzed based on McCabe's (1999) model of thematic progression. Third, the frequency of thematic progression patterns in different text books was calculated. Finally, in order to see the relationship between textbooks regarding thematic progression patterns, 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 analyzed by an experienced researcher in Applied Linguistics and agreement was made on the method of analysis.

Result and Discussion

The data were analyzed to determine different patterns of thematic progression applying McCabe's (1999) analytical framework. Following her model, those themes for which the reader has to go back more than two clauses to find a previously mentioned concept were put aside and not considered as units of analysis (p. 270). One more point deserves to mention is that some themes were not related to other clauses, and they could not be categorized under any of the conventional thematic progression patterns. These themes were called miscellaneous.

Considering the aforementioned points, the data were analyzed and the frequency of different thematic progression patterns was calculated. Then, so as to find the significance of the relationship between thematic patterns in the textbooks, the Chi-square was run. The obtained results were presented in table 1 and 2 respectively.

Through all data, all textbook writers used constant pattern more frequent than linear pattern. This result was in line with Wang (2007), but in contrast to Fries (1983), and Alonso and McCabe (2000). Wang (2007) declared that there are several main thematic progression patterns, which depend on different text types. As evidence, in narrative-type text, we often repeat the theme of one clause into the theme of the subsequent clause (constant pattern) (p.4). Fries (1983)

points out that thematic progression of an academic text needs to have high incidence of cross-referential links from the rheme of the clause to the theme of the next clause, as the academic text presents complex arguments in which each successive idea is an expansion of an idea in the previous sentence (p.124). As with Fries' (1983), Alonso and McCabe (2000) assert that linear pattern provides more of a dynamic text which works well with explanation as it allows writers to add points always moving from given idea to a new one (p.3).

The result of Chi-square shows that there was a significant difference between the uses of linear pattern of progression in three kinds of textbooks. The result also indicates that as we move from pre-requite to ESP, using linear pattern slightly increases. This could help the reader to be aware where the information has come from and where it is going, also linear pattern helps creating cohesive text.

Writers should know that linear pattern develops ideas and improves cohesion between sentences in a paragraph. Writer should also bear in mind that using simple linear pattern, as McCabe (1999) states, can ensure that the readers are constantly "with them" in terms of point of departure, thus elaborating on concepts in a way which allows readers to optimally build up the conceptual framework (p.190). Wang (2007) adds that high frequency of linear pattern in text has more dynamic effect on readers, and also causes more cohesion between ideas and sentences in the text.

Writers used constant pattern in large number in their texts. This overuse of constant ties yields simplistic, repetitive, and redundant paragraph which may result from continuous use of the same topic. The reasons behind this overuse could be that writers might also not know that this scheme makes their text be read like a list, and by using this pattern, they tend not to go in depth on the ideas introduced in the text by not expending on information introduced in the rheme. Even the results of Chi-square showed significant difference between the three textbooks in terms of constant pattern, but there was no descending or ascending order among the data.

Split rheme pattern was totally neglected in the three textbooks. It seems that the writer didn't conceder that using this thematic progression pattern will make their text to be logical and coherent. Texts with this pattern will have a clear layout for the reader to catch what the passage is about.

Miscellaneous Pattern which is outside McCabe's patterns was utilized in all the textbooks. According to Wang (2007), the overall effect of using miscellaneous pattern is in creating text which is lacking in the development of ideas (p. 6). Contrary to Wang's (2007) suggestion that miscellaneous chain distorts the development of ideas, McCabe's (1999) suggests that miscellaneous bond is crucial to the development of the discourse and can provide thematic continuity in the text because of the accessibility of their references to the reader. Sometimes the reader goes back to more than three clauses to relate propositions together even though the clauses are far from the thematic rules, and sometimes some elements even they introduced for the first time but the should be thematized (e.g., temporal adverbials) (p.271). So there are only two justifications for using miscellaneous pattern in the text, one, if and only if the reference is available in the text but it needs to go back for more than three clauses, second, there is an important element that should be thematized. Other than these, miscellaneous will result in distorting the idea development.

To sum up, textbooks writers should take into account that thematic progression is very important in guiding the reader through the logical paths constructed by the writer. If little attention is paid to this relationship, the reader may not be able to comprehend the text.

Table 1. Frequency of Thematic Progression Patterns in Iranian English Textbooks

	Linear	Constant	Split	T with split R	Miscellaneous
Pre-Requisite	10 (%13)	26 (%34)	-	-	40 (%53)
EGP	22 (%29)	20(%27)	-	-	32(%44)
ESP	31(%20)	41(%27)	-	-	79(%53)

Table 2. Result of Chi-Square Test (Thematic Progression)

	Linear	Constant	Split	T with split R	Miscellaneous
	9	26			40
Frequency	22	20	-	-	32
	31	41			79
Chi-square value	11.829	8.069	-	-	25.133
d.f.	2	2	-	-	2
Sig.	0.002	0.017	-	-	0.000

Conclusion

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 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. The patterns of thematic progression are identified by reference to the way that a text moves forward from theme to rheme, within each clause, and between clauses. 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 progression patterns used in English textbooks, Pre-requisite, EGP, and ESP, taught at Iranian universities at B.A. level, and the possible relation between these textbooks.

The data analysis indicated that different types of patterns of thematic progression (linear, constant, split rheme, and split theme) were used in the textbooks. The frequency of linear and miscellaneous patterns was different across the three textbooks. These differences were attributed to textbooks' different levels.

The result suggested that our understanding of how texts are created and interpreted would be much poorer without the concept of theme and thematic progression. 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.

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.

==

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 5 May 2012
Seyed Foad Ebrahimi and Mohsen Khedri
Thematic Progression in Iranian English Textbooks   78

References

Alonso, I. A., & McCabe, A. M. (2000). Theme, transitivity and cognitive representation in Spanish and English written texts. Retrieved from: http://www.ucm.es/info/circulo/no7/mccabe.htm.

Belmonte, I. A., & McCabe, A.M. (1998). Theme –rheme patterns in L2 writing. Retrieved from http:// www. google.com.

Bloor, T. & Bloor. M. (1995). *The functional analysis of English: A Hallidayan approach*. London: Arnold.

Danes, F. (1974). Functional sentence perspective and the organization of the text. In F. Danes,(Eds.) *Paper on functional sentence perspective* (pp. 106 – 128). Mouton : The Hague & Paris.

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., & 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. (1983). On the status of theme in English: Arguments in discourse. In J. S. Petofi & E. Sozer (Eds.), *Micro and macro connexity of text*, (pp. 116 – 152). Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag.

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

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

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

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

Hawes, T. & S. Thomas. (1997). 'Problem of thematisation in student writing'.*RELC Journal*, 28: 35-55.

Jalilifar, A.R. (2010). The status of theme in Applied Linguistics Articles. *The Asian ESP Journal,* 6 (2) 7-39 .

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.

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

Yan, F. , McDonald, E. & Musheng, C. (1993). On theme in Chinese: From clause to discourse. World Englishes, 21 (2), 281- 290.

===

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

Mohsen Khedri
Ph.D. Candidate in Applied Comparative Linguistics

University Putra Malaysia
Malaysia
Khedri295@yahoo.com