

Theme-Rheme Theory and the Textual Coherence of College Students' English Writing

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Abstract. Studies on theme and rheme were sparked off from the concept of theme and rheme proposed by Mathesius in the year of 1939. Since then, many linguists, particularly those from the Prague School, have done many studies in such a field. In 1970, Danes, a Czechoslovak linguist among them made analysis of the concept of coherence from the perspective of thematic structure and thematic progression. Thematic structure theory studies a text as a unit of transferring information. It doesn't focus on these sentences but on those patterns and principles among these sentences. Therefore, it can be introduced in English learning and teaching. Since English writing is one of the most important skills in English learning, which can well evaluate a student's English level. Students who have no idea about theme and rheme just write what they have thought and imagined in the process of English writing. As a result, abundant passages and paragraphs appear unnatural and loose. It is suggested that in our teaching of English writing, such a research product should be adopted and new thinking approaches should be introduced. We should develop the connotation and denotation of coherence and make it helpful in English writing. This methodology which regards a text as a study object can make students think more about the design of arrangement, inter-textual cohesion as well as logical relations in a text. With the help of thematic progression patterns, essays can be more coherent semantically and structurally.

Introduction

As far as students and teachers are concerned, English writing has long been recognized as one of the most daunting tasks of college English education in our country. We often hear about writing teacher's uneasy remarks about the poor quality of students' writings, which mainly manifests itself in the lack of substance, the improper way of textual development. And so often do we hear students' grumbling complaints about having nothing to say and not knowing how to organize paragraphs properly. It is investigated that among the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), writing together with listening is the weakest part for college students in China. According to the newly published College English Teaching Program, students are required to be able to apply what they have learnt in writing to compose a 120-150 words composition of a given topic within half an hour, And also the content must be coherent and no serious mistakes exist. However, the investigation into the result of College English Band-4 and Band-6 Test reveals that most of the students cannot meet the anticipated requirements (See Appendix I---Marking criteria of CET-4 and CET-6), especially in the aspect of textual coherence. Prompted by the unsettling phenomenon and enlightened by some research findings that show a much higher correlation between thematic structure and textual coherence in English writing, the author began to decide to undertake this study from practice perspective.

Role of Coherence and Cohesion in English Writing

Writing is judged by both its form and its content. A good writing should have a good expression of form and a good presentation of content. As is mentioned previously, cohesion concerns the form of a text and coherence concerns the content of a text. Coherence is established through cohesive relations and determines the interpretation of a text. If there is coherence in a piece of writing, the

writing can be understood by readers and ideas of its content can be communicated to them. This is quite the point of writing.

Professor Qi Shouhua (2000) proposes examining the structure, the style and the mechanics of a text in regard to the form, and examining the exploration of the writing topic in regard to the content. Along his approach, such questions are asked: Does it have a logical structure? Does it have clear expression? Does it have good transitions? Is it profound and influential? Is it directed and effective? Is the topic developed in depth? This standard is quite high and impractical when applied to judge our students' English writing. We may approach the form and the content of students' writing from another practical and workable perspective: the achievement of cohesion and coherence. According to the grading principles of CET4 or CET6 (See Appendix I), coherence is required in a piece of good writing. So it is worthwhile to teach our students how to achieve coherence through cohesion, for "cohesion helps to create a text", and it provides the continuity "that enables the reader to supply all the missing pieces, all the components of the picture which are not presented in the text but are necessary to its interpretation." (Halliday, 1976:324)

We can see cohesion and coherence play different roles on the writer's part and on the reader's part. To the writer, cohesion is the means to the end---coherence. He makes use of cohesion to express coherence in meaning. To the reader, cohesion is the guidance to discover coherence---the means to understanding a text. So if our students can handle both cohesion and coherence well in writing, they will be able to make a piece of effective writing.

Thematic Progression and Coherence

Professor Yang Wen-fei (2004) summarizes progression and coherence into several points. She says the process of thematic progression is undoubtedly based on coherence. She quoted the viewpoint of Hobbs:

"Coherence results from a listener trying to understand a speaker (and presumably a reader tries to understand a writer)"; "Coherence is assumed to be the result of the interpretation and integration of interpreted text elements by the listener (reader) in relation to the intentions of a speaker(writer)". Then, she infers that thematic progression reflects the normal coherent thinking of human mind, and that coherence is a kind of feeling that readers get after their understanding and that the application of thematic progression patterns should help to construct a coherent text.

The coherence of the text is sometimes reflected overtly by coherence markers, whose sequential connectivity helps us to follow the flow of the meaning. Besides those overt markers, the thematic structure can also be a useful tool in dealing with coherence. The theme-rheme analysis is a way to explain the interactive organization of sentences. Different patterns of theme and rheme may take on different coherent values in different languages. The thematic structure plays an evident role in the establishment of the coherence of the textual structure.

The thematic organization of the text is closely connected with discourse coherence or text connectivity. A text is defined as text largely in terms of its semantic coherence; however, it is useful to remember, as Danes (1974) points out, texts are not always perfect; they not only display coherence to an uneven degree, but some may be characterized as "discontinuous". Textual coherence, in this light, is not a yes/no property but rather a more-or-less property. This resistance of coherence to formulation as rules is perhaps one of the causes of difficulty in the teaching of prose writing, academic or other types of writing. Normally, different patterns of thematic progression correlate with different genres, but most texts have complex patterns of thematic progression; i.e. they do not have one single strategy. Thematic progression is one of the most important theories of discourse coherence, and it is one of the effective ways for exploring the structure of an article (Huang Guowen, 1988: 73). Thematic progression analyzes the discourse coherence from the inside of the discourse. And thematic structure reflects the way of thinking of human beings.

To summarize, the thematic structure helps to create textual coherence in that it structures the clause so that (1) the clause is more likely to succeed in conveying the intended message on the part of the writer and, (2) interpretation is facilitated and oriented on the part of the reader. So far we

have been discussing how the thematic structure contributes to textual coherence at the clause level. However, as we mentioned earlier, the significance of the thematic structure in constructing textual meaning is not confined to the clause structure. The thematic structure also plays a significant role in text construction above the clause level because it is “the most important factor in the development of the text.” (Halliday, 1994:67)

Recommendations for Future Research

Theoretically, if Theme-rheme theory is introduced to help to improve college students' writing, it is possible that the students' writing coherence will be improved. It can also be very helpful as a tool of instruction at the level of discourse for the writing teachers. Thematic progression model appears to be fully applicable in helping to reveal the internal organization of the text. But, how to apply Theme-Rheme theory into the daily teaching of college English writing needs further research. We recommend the following for the future research direction.

First, a large-scale research is recommended to explore the features and patterns of the Thematic Progression as well as its correlation with textual coherence in different texts and various types of writing in English apart from argumentative writing.

Secondly, after this present experiment, we have found that participants still have some difficulties in applying thematic progression patterns naturally into English writing. Sometimes, they even just try to apply such patterns as the only purpose and ignore the normal semantic coherence. As to this problem, future researchers may design certain teaching plans that can help students to avoid such difficulties and phenomena.

Thirdly, as this research is done with limit samplings, this may lack stringency. Therefore, for future studies, researchers may expand the sample, and had better choose other majors so that the validity of the application of Theme-rheme theory is more authentic. The control of other factors can better test whether one factor may exert influence on the other.

In a word, the appearance of thematic structure and thematic progression has opened a new field for language study, especially for discourse analysis and textual coherence. It is an urgent task for us to explore some new methodology and apply thematic progression models into the teaching practice at suitable time and make it serve the teaching of English writing.

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