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A Study on Problems of Using Theme and Rheme in the Writing of Non-English Major ESL Students of a University in Vietnam

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***Abstract**: In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) academic writing, achieving coherence and cohesion remains a major challenge for learners, particularly when instruction focuses predominantly on traditional sentence-level grammar rather than text-level organization. Grounded in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), this study investigates the application of Theme–Rheme structures and identifies recurring thematic progression issues in the English writings of non-English major students at Vietnam - Korea University of Information and Communication Technology. A total of 826 clauses extracted from 80 written texts (paragraphs, compositions, and essays) produced by 90 first-, second-, and third-year undergraduate students were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed. The findings reveal that unmarked topical Themes overwhelmingly dominate student writing (62%), followed by textual Themes (21%), marked topical Themes (15%), and interpersonal Themes (2%). Furthermore, the analysis uncovers three prominent thematic problems: the overuse of existential "There" constructions in Theme position (140 occurrences), the presence of "empty" Rhemes lacking new or developmental information, and unclear thematic references resulting from inconsistent personal pronoun shifts and the overuse of impersonal "It". The study concludes that integrating explicit instruction on Theme–Rheme patterning and thematic progression into EFL writing curricula can serve as an effective pedagogical tool to diagnose learners' structural weaknesses and enhance the overall coherence of their academic writing.*

***Keywords:** Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL); Theme–Rheme structure; thematic progression; coherence and cohesion; EFL writing; non-English major students.*

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I. Introduction

In today's global world, it is undeniable that English be the greatest common language spoken universally. Knowledge of English is considered as a major window of the modern world that helps everyone to come up in life. Those who are aware of the importance of English will make efforts to master it, because without English, their opportunities are able to be missed. Most of students in Vietnam study English from the examination point of view, so they pay much attention to doing grammatical exercises instead of practicing listening, speaking skills, reading, and writing skills. These skills, therefore, have become weaknesses of most of the Vietnamese students. This is a very concerning problem in learning and teaching languages in generally and English particularly.

As can be seen from the reality, writing skills are an extremely essential element to acquire foreign language learning. Accompany with speaking skills, writing skills are output or production in learning language progresses. They are also a key to success in sending messages, which plays a vital role in all fields. Everything is linked with writing skills. Having good ability of writing in English is the passport to get better employment opportunities. Writing is important because it's used extensively in higher education and in the workplace (Walsh, 2010). If students don't know how to express themselves in writing, they won't be able to communicate well with their professors, employers, peers, or just about anyone else. Much of professional communication is done in writing: proposals, memos, reports, applications, preliminary interviews, e-mails, and more are part of the daily life of a college student or successful graduate. Once the learners conquer these writing skills in their ESL (English as second language) classrooms, they get the mastery of these skills. Therefore, being master in writing plays a pivotal role in achieving success (Marzban & Sarjami, 2004).

Nonetheless, teaching students to be able to write in English well is one of the hardest teaching activities for elementary students. There are many factors affecting the result of English learning of ESL, such as: materials, teaching and learning method, supporting devices, educational environment and so on. In term of writing setting, students have faced many problems so far. This is also the reason why this study is conducted to enable non-English major EFL students at Vietnam Korea University of Information and Communication Technology to improve their writing skills.

This study is aimed to find out issues on writing using Theme and Rheme of non-English major students at a university. In accordance with the formulation of the problem, then the purposes of this study are

also to identify the structure of Theme and Rheme and to help students solve some problems with them. Knowing about how important Theme-Rheme and its organization pattern is, the students themselves would also know how to make good academic essay writing with well-organized ideas and coherence by applying the term of Theme-Rheme and its organization pattern.

This research studies types of Theme-Rheme and the problems of Misusing Theme and Rheme by 90 male and female undergraduate ESL students of Vietnam Korea University of Information and Communication Technology. The three groups are from first, second and third stages. The participants of this study range in ages from (18 to 24) years old. All of them are non-English major students and were taught the features of a good paragraph and how to write correctly.

In order to achieve the above-mentioned aims, the focus of this research is two-pronged. This research will seek the answers to the following questions:

What theme types did students use in their writings?

What are the problems of using Theme-Rheme in their writings?

How can the progression of information in English texts serve to providing greater cohesion in students' writings?

II. The research methodology

The research described in this paper centers on texts produced by students as part of their assessment. The participants initially got comprehension about the two terms "Theme and Rheme" and their meanings. After that, each group was asked to do a task; freshmen, sophomores, and juniors had to write a paragraph, a composition and an essay respectively. The topics were Hobbies and Healthy lifestyle.

In the end, the written texts – paragraphs, compositions and essays are analyzed to clarify the thematic progression of each clause and to indicate the Theme-Rheme problems in students' written English language. In methods for statistical data analysis, the distributional method is applied to make it easy to collect data, which is divided into some lingual units. In addition, it is essential to use deletion technique so that crucial element conveying the message of the clause can be easily recognized. The following steps summarize the procedure which was applied in designing the research:

1- dividing all sentences into clauses.
2- numbering all the clauses
3- rewriting and labeling the parts of the clause based on thematic structure.
4- identifying Theme types in the written texts
5- identifying Theme-Rheme problems
6- drawing conclusion.

III. Literature review

So far, there are been some studies on carrying out tackling and focusing on the concept of Theme-Rheme as a strategy for observing coherence and most of them came out with the significance of teaching Them-Rheme for EFL learners. The relationship between Theme and Rheme has caught much attention in the teaching of academic writing (Wang, 2007). Students who are more effective at using Theme-Rheme appear to be more successful in producing academic papers (Witt and Faigley, 1981). A student may find in any textbook writing tips and strategies to help them fix basic errors as well as enhance their writing quality. Most books of that kind would mention more or less the two important concepts of coherence and cohesion in writing in general, and in English writing in particular. As one vital factor to determine whether or not a writing text is "good", cohesion is interpreted as tight connection between sentences to create paragraphs, and between paragraphs to create a text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Cohesion can be considered as an element of coherence which is what makes the text understood in a certain context (Witte & Faigley, 1981). In ESL/EFL teaching and learning, failure to create cohesive ties in students' writings may result in their low scores in exams (Bamberg, 1983 as cited in Wang, 2007). Text connectivity in Halliday and Hasan's taxonomy is not limited to adjacent sentences, but extended to bind larger chunks of discourse throughout the text. In the field of functional grammar, the Theme-Rheme structures have been acknowledged as the structure of clause as a message, and it is all. It makes room for me to do research on writings in term of Theme-Rheme.

IV. Theoretical background

4.1. Systemic Functional Grammar/ Linguistics

Grammar is the 'one that is pushed in the direction of semantics' (Halliday, 1976). Grammar is not a set of rigid rules that must be followed in order to produce grammatical sentences. Rather, grammar is a set of strategies that one employs in order to produce coherent communication (Givón, 1993). Bawarshi and Reiff (2010, p.29) define "Functional" as the work that language does within particular context, and "Systemic" as the

structure or organization of language so that it can be used to get things done within those context. It can be concluded that Systemic Functional Linguistics focuses on language and context.
Systemic Functional Grammar or Linguistics, first introduced by Michael Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), refers to a new approach to the study of grammar that is radically different from the traditional view in which language is a set of rules for specifying grammatical structures. Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) is a text-based theory of language. The key questions and applications of the theory revolve not around the syntax of sentences, but around the functions of texts in context (Bartles, 2005, p.236).

4.2. Concept of Theme – Rheme

Theme and Rheme are actually not new concepts and have been issues of debate since the eighteenth century when Weil (1844) introduced a clausal structure consisting of a point of departure and enunciation (as cited in Wang, 2007). Also known in different terms such as Topic and Comment, or Topic and Dominance, Theme and Rheme come from the terminology of the Prague school of linguists, and are used favorably by Halliday (2004) in his theory of Systemic Functional Grammar.

Theme and Rheme are the two components which together make up the organizational construct that is the thematic structure of the clause. The Theme comes first and is identified as the first constituent in the clause. What follows is the Rheme. (Angela Downing and Philip Locke, (2006).

Theme-Rheme is a structure that carries a "line of meaning", hence assigning a clause a message that it has to bear. The structure, as known as thematic structure, presents the distribution of information within a clause as well as within a sentence. Information is allocated in two parts of the clause namely "Theme" and "Rheme". Theme is defined as "the point of departure" of the message (Halliday, 1985, 2004), and frequently serves to present given information which has already been mentioned somewhere in the text, or understood as a common knowledge from the particular context. In other words, Theme provides a setting which typically contains familiar or old information. The setting is followed by the remainder of the message – Rheme. Rheme is the second part of the clause in which Theme is developed, and usually contains unfamiliar information, or new knowledge that a writer assumes his/her readers do not know. The examples of Theme-Rheme are in the table 4.1 below:

Table 4.1

Theme	Rheme
My parents	are hard-working farmers.
On 23 January,	Vietnam confirmed the first two cases of COVID-19.
In Vietnam	tourism has developed significantly so far.
The patient (case #17), a 26-year-old woman,	had been travelling across Europe during the outbreak

From the above division of Themes and Rhemes in the sentences, it is possible to see that theme is not equated with the subject of a sentence; nor is rheme equated with the predicate.
Based on its type, Theme can be classified into topical, interpersonal and textual. The explanation about Theme is presented in the following section.

4.3. Classification of Themes

4.3.1. Topical Theme

Topical Theme is Theme of a clause ends with the first constituent that is either participant, circumstance or process (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014,p.105). This type of theme is presented by a nominal group (e.g.. everyone), a prepositional phrase (e.g./ For this purpose), or an adverbial group (e.g., By the end of this year), as it can be seen in the example below.

Table 4.2

Theme	Rheme
The poor	don't have many things to eat.
Very quickly,	he came to her house and took her to the airport.
By the end of this week,	I will have finished my assignment.

According to the examples above, the first clause has nominal group "The poor". Since it is placed in the beginning of the clause, it is considered as Theme in clause. The second clause has adverbial group "Very quickly" in its initial position. The last clause has prepositional phrase indicating time "By the end of this week" in its initial position.

Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) added that topical Themes are divided into two subtypes: simple and multiple Themes. Simple Theme always has a topical element. For instance:

Table 4.3

Theme	**Rheme**
Peter	was so kind to treat his guests well.

While multiple Theme may has the interpersonal and textual Theme in addition to topical Theme. Here is an example of multiple Theme.

Table 4.4

Theme		**Rheme**
Textual	**Topical**	
And,	the servant	was waiting for the guests.

The other categorization of Topical Theme made by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) is marked and unmarked theme. When an element that occupies the theme position of the clause conflates with grammatical subject, this theme is called unmarked theme. As following example:

Table 4.5

Theme	**Rheme**
The woman	went out and forward to the beach.

Meanwhile, 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 instance:

Table 4.6

Theme	**Rheme**
At the beach,	he was sitting on the sand waiting for her.

4.3.2. Interpersonal Theme

Interpersonal Theme (vocatives, modal, or mood marking) functions to code the speaker's or writer's personal judgment on meaning. According to Paltridge (2006), interpersonal Theme refers to an item that comes before Rheme which indicates the relation between participants in the text, or the position of view that is being taken in the clause. This may include the finite in interrogative clauses where it precededs the subject, vocative (personal name used to address), and mood adjuncts (surprisingly, in my opinion, unfortunately) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1994), as indicated in the following examples:

Table 4.7

Theme		**Rheme**
Interpersonal	**Topical**	
Peter,	Mary	has just called you.
Probably,	the team	will win the tournament.
Will	Covid-19	stop its spread soon?

4.3.3. Textual Theme

Textual Theme (discourse markers and conjunctions) relates the meaning of the particular clause to the other parts of the text. It does not express interpersonal or experiential meaning, but it performs cohesive work by

connecting one clause to its context. (Eggins:2004). Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) stated that Textual Theme is a theme that includes any combination of Continuative (yes, no, well, oh, now), Conjunctions (and, because, who), Conjunctive Adjunct (for instance, in addition, likewise). Conjunctive adjuncts are allowed to move freely in a clause whereas conjunctions are constrained in the beginning (Giroux, 1997). Moreover, Conjunctives, on the other hand, relate the clause to the preceding text by providing a logical between messages. The examples are well, right, OK, now, anyway, of course. The example of Textual Theme is presented below.

Table 4.8

Theme			**Rheme**
Continuative	**Conjunctive**	**Topical**	
Oh,	in addition,	we	should make time for our family.

4.4. The problems of Misusing Theme – Rheme

The problems of inappropriately handling the flow of Theme and Rheme are quite common among inexperienced writers. Bloor & Bloor (1992) identify three common problems resulting from the misuse of theme and rheme: The problem of the brand new Theme, The problem of the double Rheme , and The problem of the empty Rheme. Other related problems were identified by Belmonte and Mccabe-Hidalgo (1998): Over-use of constant progression, Confusing selection of Discoursal and Topical Themes, Intervening material between mention in Rheme and subsequent thematization, Over-use of 'There', Themes with unclear reference. All the problems that are elicited in students' writings are going to be defined, identified and discussed in the second part of the practical side of this study.

V. Findings and discussion

5.1. Theme types

Generally, the methodology of this study is quantitative, in that things are counted. The Theme of the main clause was analyzed through reference to the roles which the Theme performed, i.e. interpersonal, textual, marked and unmarked. Anything not considered Theme was considered Rheme. The total number of the clause was 826 clauses which were analyzed for Theme types.

The different type of Theme were counted, and shown as in the following table 5.1

Table 5.1

Theme type	**No. of occurrence (times)**	**Percentage**
Topical - Unmarked	512	62%
Topical - Marked	126	15%
Interpersonal	15	2%
Textual	173	21%

As would be expected, the highest frequency of occurrence of the Theme choices in the present corpus were unmarked Themes and it dominates the existence of theme in the students' texts. It occurs 512 times (62%). Meanwhile, marked theme accounted for 126 of 826 clauses (15%). The rating of Textual Themes occupied 21% (173 times) of the total in the corpus. However, the frequency of interpersonal themes was very low 15 (2%) of the total 826 clauses.

5.2. Theme problems

This part will demonstrate the analysis of the students' writings. Finding problems of inappropriately handling the flow of Theme and Rheme is quite common among inexperienced writers. Titles problems, which were elicited in students' writing, are explained and illustrated below:

5.2.1. The over-use of " theme" in the theme selection

Among 80 written texts, there are 140 clauses starting with "There" word. It's considered as an easy way to start an idea or begin a paragraph or describe something with "there". Hence, it occurs very frequently in their writing. The following examples illustrate this fact:

There are many different ways to enjoy our free time.
There are many hobbies that we can try in spare time.
There is an only hobby I am taking, which is playing football.
There are three reasons for me to do gymnastics.
There are lots of ways to stay healthy.
There are many problems you may get if you don't have a good health.

5.2.2. Empty rheme and non-constant progression

It is common in students' writing, who fail to represent 'new' information in Rheme position. For instance:
Playing soccer is a great sport.
Lack of health awareness is a serious problem.
Fruits and vegetables are good food.
The Rheme 'is a great sport', 'is a serious problem', and 'are good food' fail to offer any information, which should be mentioned previously.

5.2.3 Themes with unclear reference

This one can be divided into two categories according to Belmonte and Mccabe-Hidalgo (1995:25) an over-use of pronouns, mainly personal pronouns and indefinite pronouns, and the over-use of the indefinite "it". For the first one, most of the students switch from pronoun "I" to "we" to "you" without any logical connection and they use the pronoun "your" instead of "my" in their writings as it is shown in the following examples:
Everyone should take a hobby if you want to have fun in your life.
My father often play tennis in my free time.
You shouldn't eat fatty food or junk food because they are very unhealthy and it is not good for our health.
To have a good health, we should follow some tips, which can improve your health.
It is very important for us to keep healthy.
It's a good advice to eat many fruits and vegetables.

5.3. Discussion

The discussion discusses the summarizing of the data in the finding and interpretation related to the findings. Among the total 826 clauses, there are some problems in texts written by 80 students.

VI. Conclusion

Writing is one of the four language skills in EFL teaching and learning. The findings confirm that students are also interested in second language writing. However, they lack practice and experience in formal writing. Therefore, teachers during their classes should pay more attention to the development of formal writing skills.

Teaching composition in our universities depends on producing correct grammatical sentences containing an idea. The teachers insist on an idea that the sentences in a paragraph ,a composition ,or an essay should be linked together to one main idea without teaching them that in each sentence there should be a theme and a rheme and the types of possible themes in writing or the different ways of thematic progression. Thus, it is suggested that teachers need to look beyond the traditional grammar of the clause when teaching writing and should be aware of all the facets of composition writing . The paper shows that Theme and Rheme patterning can be effectively applied in classrooms to diagnosis students' weaknesses.

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