

Textuality in Academic Reading Text: A Case of Native and Non-native Writers

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Abstract: The present study aimed to find out the textual theme, its types in academic reading texts developed by native and non-native writers. To this end, sixteen texts from four academic reading comprehension textbooks were selected. To uncover the frequency of textual theme and its types the data were analyzed based on Halliday's (1985, 1994, 2004) model of thematic organization. The result indicated that textual theme and its types were tackled differently by native and non-native writers. The findings showed the importance of textual theme and its types in creating cohesive text. The findings of this study are applicable in teaching reading comprehension skill.

Key words: Theme, rheme, textual theme, reading comprehension

1. Introduction

In reading comprehension classroom, one of the most important components is the reading textbook. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) argued that "the textbook is an almost universal element of teaching, and no teaching-learning situation is complete until it has its relevant textbook" (p. 315). In the same line of argumentation, Cunningsworth (1995) stated that textbook have the potential for serving several additional roles in the ELT curriculum. Textbooks are syllabus where they reflect pre-determined learning objectives, an effective resource for self-directed learning and for presentation material, a source of ideas and activities, and a reference source for students. To get these objectives, texture of the texts is an important aspect which should receive a great attention while developing these textbooks. Texture, based on Halliday and Hasan (1976, 1985), consists of structural and non-structural aspects. While the latter one refers to the cohesive ties between different elements in different sentences like references, substitutions, ellipses, and conjunctions, the former refers to inter-sentence or intra-sentence structures like theme/rheme structure.

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".

A number of studies have been carried out in the recent years to uncover the thematic structure across different modes of language. Some studied thematic structure of: different languages (Ventola, 1995; Jalilifar & Khedri, 2011); various disciplines (Whittaker, 1995; Ghadessy, 1999; Ebrahimi & Khedri, 2011); within discipline (Martinez, 2003; Lores, 2004); essay writing (North, 2005); and composition writing (Wang, 2007; Ebrahimi, 2008, Ebrahimi & Ebrahimi, 2012 a). Yet, despite the interest in thematicity, little researchers have tackled the use of theme in textbooks, one exception is study done by Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi (2012 b) which focused on thematic manifestation in Iranian English textbooks.

This scarcity is felt more when it comes to textual theme in reading comprehension texts written by native or non-native writers of English. Therefore, having the importance of theme in textuality of text; and also extremely low done studies in this area of research in mind, this study aims to investigate the status of textual theme in reading comprehension texts written by native and non-native writers of English. The rationale behind shedding the light on textual theme was that this theme increases the textuality of the text by linking the sentences of the text (Hasselgard, 2000).

2. Corpus

This study was run on the corpus of sixteen texts extracted from four reading comprehension textbooks written by native and non-native writers of English. All the textbooks were used for teaching this skill in EFL context.

2.1. Analytical models

In order to achieve a well-organized study, a plausible and updated analytical model was used in this study. Concerning textual theme and its types, Halliday's (1985, 1994, 2004) model of thematic organization was adopted. According to Halliday textual theme includes:

A. Continuatives which are small set of discourse items which signal that a new move is beginning, such as: yes, no, oh... (Example 1)

Example 1: **Oh**, no that is amazing.

B. Structural elements like coordinates and subordinates (example 2)

Example 2: A woman's dog made a mess on the train, **but** she refused to clean it up and left.

C. Conjunctive adjuncts which relate one clause to the preceding clauses (example 3).

Example 3: **However**, moblogs can be dangerous, too.

2.2. 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).

2.3. Procedure

At first the textbooks were collected and sixteen units from four textbooks were randomly selected. Second, the data were analyzed based on Halliday's (1985, 1994, 2004) categorization of textual and its types. Third, the frequency of theme types and thematic progression patterns in different text books were calculated. Finally, in order to see the relationship between the two groups of the texts

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

3. Result and discussion

To uncover the frequency of textual theme, the data was analyzed based on Halliday's (1985, 1994, 2004) model of thematic organization and the result regarding textual theme and its types are presented in table 1 and 2 respectively.

The result reported more use of textual theme in texts written by native writers than those written by non-native writers. This finding may show that native writers include more textual theme in their text to provide more explicit guidance to the reader on how to construct a coherent interpretation of the text. Based on the gained result, it seems that native writer used more conjunctions, coordinators, and subordinators which function as a textual theme in their text to create a more cohesive text. The result also might show that the text written by native writers are more narrative comparing to those written by non-native writers. Using more textual theme by native writers could indicate the higher impersonality and factuality of their text. They may used it more because of the two function which textual theme serves in the text. one function is internal, to give information about the organization or function of part of the text, the other external, expressing logical relations which hold in the world.

One worthy point to mention was that in addition to the big difference in the frequency of textual theme, native speaker used a bigger variety of textual theme in their texts than that on non-native writers. While in texts written by non-native writers, textual theme mostly realized through some themes such as and, and but (example 4&5), native writers used themes like However, therefore, or, so, even, also (example 6&7).

Example 4: Studying in New Zealand was a fun experience for me, **but** it was also lots of hard work.

Example 5: I missed my family, **and** I really missed my two cats.

Example 6: **Also**, lots of eye contact is necessary.

Example 7: **So** I have to use English most of the time.

Table 1: textual theme frequency and percentage in native and non-native written text

	Native Writers (%)	Non-native writers (%)
Textual theme	15 (11)	43 (23)

4. Textual Theme Types

The data was analyzed for textual theme types and the result is presented in table 2. The result displayed that native and non-native writers mostly relied on structural theme to present the textual theme. This was in the same line with what earlier found by McCabe's (1999), North's (2005), and Whittaker's (1995) findings. McCabe (1999) found that the most frequent types of textual theme used in English history textbooks were structural elements (p.221).

The result also displayed difference between the two texts regarding the structural theme. While this theme applied for 12 times in texts written by non-native writers, it was used for 38 times to realize the textual theme in the texts written by native writers. This could suggest native writers used this theme to create semantic and structural relationship between the sentences in the text (example 8). They also included more structural theme to create more cohesive texts. North (2005) also stated that structural elements provide more explicit help to the writer in writing coherent texts.

Example 8: you need to spend more money **or** you will lose some awesome experiences.

In case of conjunctive adjunct, native writer utilized this theme more comparing to non-native writer. According to Halliday (1994), conjunctive adjuncts only set up a semantic relationship with what proceeds in contrast to structural themes which set a grammatical relation. In this case it seems that native writers want to highlight the semantic more than structural relationship by using this theme while linking two ideas in the text (example 9)

Example 9: **therefore**, they use English in various important ways within their own government and everyday life.

Concerning continuative theme, this theme was totally neglected by native as well as the non-native writers. This is justifiable because Halliday (1994) states that continuatives are discourse signalers showing a new move is beginning in speech (p.92). Therefore, continuatives are signalers of spoken discourse rather than written discourse.

Table 2: Frequency of Textual Themes Types

Textual types	Native Writers (%)	Non-native writers (%)
Structural theme	38 (88)	12 (80)
Conj- adjunct	5 (12)	3 (20)
Continuative	--	--

Table 3 Results of Chi-square Test

Theme	Percentage	chi-square value	df	sig.
Textual	11			
Theme	23	4.235	1	0.0396

Critical value was 5.9915

In order to find the potential relationship between the textual theme manifestation in texts written by native and non-native writers, the chi-square was applied, and the results are presented in table 3. Chi-square analysis showed that there was significant difference between the texts written by native and non-native writers in terms of textual theme. This means that take assumption that textual theme increase the text coherence in mind, therefore texts developed by native writers are easier to comprehend and understand.

5. Conclusion and Implication

The results suggest that textual theme and its types are highly effective and valuable technique in writing. It enhances connectivity between ideas in the text semantically and structurally. This could be achieved through using structural and conjunctive adjunct themes. The result also suggests that texts which have more textual theme should be effectively applied in the classroom to help students in reading comprehension classroom.

The result of the present study will benefit the writers in general and non-native writer in particular. Textual theme awareness can help writers to create cohesive texts. They as well by using textual theme can organize the message in the clauses, create texts, and set up a local environment in which the readers can interpret their text.

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