

# Interpersonal Theme in EFL Students Composition Writings

<sup>1</sup>Seyed Foad Ebrahimi, <sup>2</sup>Seyed Jamal Ebrahimi

<sup>1</sup>English Department, Shadegan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shadegan, Iran

<sup>2</sup>English Department, Shadegan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shadegan, Iran

[seyedfoade@yahoo.com](mailto:seyedfoade@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** The present study aimed to find out the interpersonal theme, its types and its relation to students' level of language proficiency. For this aim, ninety male and female students majoring in English language translation in Abadan Islamic Azad University were selected. They were divided into three groups- elementary, intermediate, and advance students. The three groups also sat for a homogeneity test (Fowler & Coe, 1976). Then three pictorial stories were used for gathering the data from the students. The data were analyzed based on Halliday (1994) models of thematic organization. The result showed small decrease in the use of this theme types moving from elementary to advance students indicating the more factual nature of advance students compositions. The findings of this study are applicable in teaching writing skill.

**Key words:** Theme, Rheme, Interpersonal theme, Composition writing

## 1. Introduction

In order to help students improve their reading and writing skills, they need to be aware of the structural patterns of text. Among such structural patterns is Halliday's thematic structure. Thematic structure originated from systemic functional grammar. Systemic functional grammar (SFG) is a grammar model developed by Halliday — the most well-known component of a broad social semiotic approach to language called systemic-functional linguistics, originally articulated by Halliday in the 1960s.

Systemic-functional grammar is concerned primarily with the *choices* that are made available to speakers of a language by their grammatical systems. These choices are assumed to be meaningful and relate speakers' intentions to the concrete forms of a language.

Chrstie (2002, p.11) suggested that systemic functional linguistics theory is distinctive in at least three senses: Firstly, in the claims it makes regarding the metafunctional organization of all natural languages; Secondly, in the particular uses and significance it attaches to the notion of *system*; and Thirdly, in the particular claims it makes regarding the relationship of language-or *text*- and context. The last takes us into discussion of related terms of *register* and *genre*. Halliday and Matthiessen, (1998) argued that systemic functional grammar considers the clause as made by a combination of three metafunctions:

**Interpersonal metafunction:** This is concerned with the interaction between speaker and listener - the grammatical resources for enacting social roles in general, and speech roles in particular, in dialogic interaction; i.e. for establishing, changing, and maintaining interpersonal

relations. One of its major grammatical systems is mood, the grammaticalization of speech function (p.12).

**Ideational metafunction:** This is concerned with ideation- grammatical resources for construing our experience of the world around us and inside us. One of its major grammatical system is transitivity, the resource for constructing our experience the flux of 'going on', as structural configurations; each consisting of a process, the participants involved in the process, and circumstances attendant on it (p.13).

**Textual metafunction:** This is concerned with creation of text- with the presentation of ideational and interpersonal meanings as information that can be shared by speaker and listener in text unfolding in context. One of the major textual system is theme, the resource for getting up a local context for a clause by selecting a local point of departure in the flow of information (or perhaps rather "swell of information", since it is not a uniform flow) (p.13).

According to Halliday (1985, p. 30), theme is an element which serves as the point of departure of the message and what the speaker has in mind to start with. It is the element in a particular structural configuration taken as whole, and it organizes the clause as a message. The remainder of the message is called the rheme. Therefore, a clause consists of a theme combined with a rheme and the structure is expressed by order. The order for this is theme followed by rheme. Halliday (1985, p.39) elaborates further by stating that, theme is what the clause is about and it comes in the first position, but this position is not what defines the theme; it is a means which realizes the function of the theme. In the same line of argumentation, Brown and Yule (1983, p. 126) use the term theme to refer to a formal category in the analysis of sentences or clauses in a

complex or compound sentence. They assume that it is the left- most constituent of the sentence which has two important functions:

1. It maintains a coherent point of view by connecting back and linking into the previous discourse.
2. It serves as a point of departure for the further development of the discourse (p. 133).

Some researchers point on the importance of thematic structure in clause organization. They stated that for ESL students to improve their reading and writing skills, they need to be aware of the implicit organizational patterns of texts (Agawa, 2004, p. 11), that cohesion in student's writing can be improved dramatically if attention is given to theme selection and thematic progression in text (Wang, 2007, p. 8), and that choice of theme are crucial to the success of texts, and writers may fail if they are not aware of the need to select the information they place in first position (Berry, 1989, p. 71).

A number of studies have been carried out to find out thematic structure in student's writing. Coffin and Hewings (2003) studied the notion of theme and appraisal in the non-native students' writings. Belmonte and McCabe (1998, pp. 15-26) analyzed student compositions in terms of thematic selection and progression. Wang (2007) explored the relationship between theme/rheme organization and the cohesion of academic text. In her study North (2005) used systemic functional approach to analyze essays written by students from different backgrounds.

Even though several studies have been targeted the area of thematic structure, interpersonal theme in students' writing and its possible relationship with students' level of language proficiency has been neglected. One of the difficulties that EFL students and Iranian students in particular may have in their writing is how to achieve cohesion, which contributes substantially to their scores in examinations; one reason behind this difficulty may be thematic fitness between ideas, sentences, and details in the text. Therefore, the present research aims to find out the possible interpersonal theme types and their relation to students' level of language proficiency.

## 2. Methodology

### Participants

Participants in this study were ninety male and female students majoring in English language translation in Abadan Islamic Azad University. They were divided into three groups- elementary students (30), intermediate students (27), and advance students (23). Sophomore students had already passed two courses in English grammar. Junior students had passed an additional course in basic English writing, and senior had just finished a further course in advance writing besides other courses. The three

groups also sat for a homogeneity test (Fowler & Coe, 1976), and the average score of each group was above 70 percent. In addition an English native speaker who was working in Darkhovain Petrochemical Company was also requested to participate in the study.

### Materials

Three pictorial stories were used for gathering data from students. The rationale for selecting pictorial stories was to control students' writing. These stories were selected based on their availability. The stories were *Boz Boz Qandi (The She-Goat)* by Satari (2007), *Moush Dom Borideh (Tailless Mouse)*, by Ahtarami (2005) and *Gorbahhaye Shahzadeh (Princess' Cats)* by Panahi Azar (2005). A brief account of each story follows:

*Boz Boz Qandi (The She-Goat)* describes a goat that wanted to go to the jungle to find some food. She told her children not to open the door for the wolf. But the wolf could deceptively trick them, and they opened the door, and he ate them. Just one of them could narrowly escape. When the she-goat came back home and saw her house in a mess, she burst out crying and started looking for her children; finally she could find only one of them. The baby goat told her all the story, so she decided to fight the wolf. Finally she found the wolf, tore his stomach, and took out her children and put stones instead of them. When the wolf wanted to drink water, he fell into the river and drowned.

*Moush Dom Borideh (Tailless Mouse)* is about a mouse that was chased by a cat. The cat could not catch him, but she cut his tail. The mouse became disappointed and asked an old woman to sew his tail to him, but she recommended him to go to the shoemaker, and he also told the mouse to go to the carpet maker; the carpet maker could not help him either. The poor mouse went to the hen, told her all the story, and she advised him to see the grosser. But again he was at a loss. Then he saw a goat, farm, and a kind farmer and asked them for help, but they could not help him either. Finally, he came back to the shoemaker, and the shoemaker sewed his tail to him. The mouse became happy and went back to the jungle.

*Gorbahhaye Shahzadeh (The Princess' Cats)* is about a rich woman with four cats. There was a doctor who saw the cats everyday. The woman had a jealous servant who hated cats. One day the servant decided to take the cats out and sell them, but on the way two dogs attacked him, and the cats fell into the river. A kind street cat saved them. They spent a night in the street cat's home. Finally they went back to their owner. The servant wanted to get rid of them by whatever means, so he caught them again and decided to sell them. But a kind mouse saw the servant and told the cats about the servant's plot. The cats attacked the servant and freed themselves. The cats finally came back to the lady, and she became happy.

### Instruments

To analyze students' writing in terms of interpersonal theme and its sub types, this study relied on Halliday's model of thematic organization. In his model, Interpersonal theme which consists of any combination of the *finite operator*, *wh-interrogative*, *vocative*, *modal adjunct*, *imperative lets*.

- A. The *Finite*, usually indicated by an auxiliary verb. It is used to signals a need for response in the thematic position.  
e.g. *Are you going now?*  
*Should she study hard for the final exam?*
- B. A *Wh- element* usually indicates that the addressee should give an answer.  
e.g. *Why did you do that?*  
*How old are you?*  
*Where are you from?*
- C. A *Vocative* is usually used to identify the addressee in the exchange.  
e.g. *Tom, can I borrow your book?*  
*Mr. Nilsson, can you help me?*
- D. An *Modal Adjunct*, which is usually realized through adverb provides the speaker's comment or attitude towards the message.  
e.g. *Surprisingly, he did not look after his father.*  
*Perhaps, Tom is cleverer than Bob.*
- E. *Let's*, is used in imperative sentence.  
e.g. *Let's go to cinema.*  
*Let's play football.*

Three language proficiency tests from three levels of *Nelson Test* (Fowler & Coe, 1976) were administered to the students as homogeneity tests. The rationale behind this was to make sure that students were categorized into appropriate groups. *Nelson English Language Test* covers a wide range of items appropriate to the various levels from beginners to advanced, and it is accurate means of measuring the general standard of English which forms the basis for specific skills such as composition writing, comprehension, and other complex skills. Each test includes 50 items covering grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension items. As Fowler and Coe claim, all the items in these tests have been carefully pre-tested (1976).

### 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

First of all, students' grammar and writing scores were collected from University Examination Department and then their scores on Nelson test were also obtained; the mean and standard deviation of the students' scores on the Nelson test and their performance on grammar and writing examinations were calculated.

Second, having pigeonholed students into appropriate proficiency groups, the researcher asked them to narrate three pictorial stories given to them each in a 30-minute session. The stories were administered without any Persian or English description provided by the researcher. Cross-level comparison of the compositions provided the researcher information concerning their thematic options; however, the researcher could hardly judge the accuracy of their thematic choices. Therefore, the same stories were given to an English native speaker and he was requested to describe them. This enabled the researcher to use the native speakers' writing as criterion measure against which students' thematic choices could be evaluated.

Finally, to determine the interpersonal theme and its types in students' writing and its relation to their language proficiency, the students' writings were scanned and converted into Rich Text Format and word count was run on them. The total number of words was 54422 (Elementary group 17756, Intermediate group 19060, and Advance group 17606). Next the frequencies of interpersonal theme as well as its types were calculated. In order to see the possible relationship and to check the significance of the differences between students' language level and their interpersonal theme, *chi-square* test was run on the data.

To increase the reliability of data analysis and minimize researcher bias or any possible wrong classification, the researcher gave six texts from the data to be analyzed by an experienced researcher in the area of applied linguistics and agreement was made on the method of analysis.

### 3. Result

Overall, interpersonal theme was utilized identically in the three levels of language proficiency. This type of theme was underestimated in students' writings suggesting the factual tone of students' writings. This finding was in line with Coffin and Hewings (2005) finding. They found (4.25%) interpersonal themes in the students' writings. The reason could be that where the interpersonal stances are signaled by pronouns such as *I* and *we* in theme position they will be categorized as topical not interpersonal themes. This finding was in contrast to North's (2005) finding. In the analysis of students' essays, she found (9.75%) interpersonal theme in students' essays (p.7). The difference between the present study's result and North's finding could

suggest a low degree of personality in the students' writings of this study, and can also be explained in terms of generic differences, that is, students' writings are not reader friendly. The result is displayed in table 1.

Table 2 presents the frequency and percentage of different kinds of interpersonal themes used in students' and the native speaker's writings. The most frequent type of interpersonal was modal adjunct. Finite operators occurred in a very low proportion and wh-interrogatives and *let's* were almost declined. The modal adjunct high frequency in the corpus was in line with Ghadessy's (1995) finding in sport's reports. He found that the most common interpersonal theme is modal adjunct (p. 135).

The native speaker's writing was also analyzed in case of interpersonal theme. The result showed that overall, the number of interpersonal theme in native speaker's writing was proportionally greater indicating that native speaker's writing is more reader-friendly. Comparing the two results also showed differences in finite operator and wh-interrogative. Difference in case of finite operator indicates that native speaker's writing is more argumentative, and using wh-interrogatives revealed the higher percentage of question in native speaker's writing.

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Interpersonal Theme

	Elementary (%)	Intermediate (%)	Advanced (%)	Native (%)
Interpersonal	172 (5)	158 (4)	114 (4)	11 (8)

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of Interpersonal theme types

Interpersonal types	Elementary (%)	Intermediate (%)	Advance (%)	Native Speaker (%)
Modal Adjunct	169 (98)	137 (87)	109 (96)	5 (42)
Finite Operator	3 (2)	16 (10)	4 (3)	3 (25)
Let's	--	2 (1)	1 (1)	4 (33)
Vocative	--	2 (1)	--	---
Wh-interrogative	--	2 (1)	--	---

Table 3 Results of Chi-square Test

Theme	frequency	chi-square value	df	sig.
Interpersonal	172			
Theme	158	12.378	2	.002
	114			

Critical value was 5.9915

The result of chi-square showed that there was a significant difference between the three groups of language proficiency in terms of interpersonal theme. This result also showed that as the students' level of language proficiency increased their use interpersonal theme decreased. The result of Chi-square result is presented in table 3.

#### 4. Discussion

In case of different types of interpersonal theme, modal adjunct was used more frequently in students' writings. An interesting point was as the students' level of proficiency increased the frequency of modal adjuncts decreased. Halliday (1994) stated that modal adjuncts express the speakers' judgment regarding the relevance of the message (p. 49). According to McCabe (1999) modal adjunct, one of the main realizations of interpersonal theme, are of special interest in considerations of theme as they are flexible as to their placement in the clause: Writers can choose to place them at the beginning of the clause, at the end, or somewhere in between (e.g. after the subject). So this

decrease might imply that as students of the senior group place the modal adjuncts in different places in the clause, sophomore students insist on thematizing modal adjuncts.

The result also showed that there is no relationship between students' level of language proficiency and their use of finite operator in their writings. Halliday (1994) states that finite operator makes the position finite and brings it down to earth as it is something that can be argued and make it arguable. It relates the proposition to its context. If finite operators are used in the text, they make the text more argumentative. This can be done in one of two ways. One is by reference to the time of speaking; the other by reference to the judgment of the speaker (p. 75). An example of the first is *did* in *did you believe him*; of the second, *could* in *could you sew my tail*. The native speaker's greater use of finite operator made his composition more argumentative. One reason could be that the native speaker deals with this writing as an academic writing that based on Fries (1983) should be argumentative.

## 5. Conclusion

The data analysis indicated that different types of interpersonal theme as well as its theme types were used in students' writings. The frequency of interpersonal showed a small difference across the three levels. These differences were attributed to students' different levels of language proficiency. The frequencies of textual and marked themes were somewhat similar, attributing this similarity to the shared genre.

The results suggest that interpersonal theme and in general thematic organization are highly effective and valuable technique in writing. It enhances connectivity between ideas in the text. The result also suggests that theme and rheme patterning can be effectively applied in classrooms to help students in writings. Student will know where they are losing their effectiveness in their arguments due to problems with thematic selection and structure.

## Implication

The result of the present study will benefit the EFL students and instructors in general and Iranian EFL students and instructors in particular in composition writings. Theme awareness can help students to create cohesive composition by for example using interpersonal theme, the writer exchanges structure, and expresses his or her attitude.

## References

- Agawa, G.S. (2004) . Modeling reader-based prose: Topic development patterns in ESL readings. Reterived May 30, 2007 from: <http://web1.hup.edu/images/studies/tesl/04Agawa-readability>.
- Ahtarami, M. (2005). *Moush Dom Borideh*. Tehran: Honarvar.
- Belmonte, I. A. & MacCabe, A. M. (1998) . Theme –rheme patterns in L2 writing. Retrieved May 30, 2007 from: [www.ucm.es/BUCM/edu/articulos/DIDA.pdf](http://www.ucm.es/BUCM/edu/articulos/DIDA.pdf).
- Berry, M. (1989). Thematic options and success in writing. In M. Ghadessy,(ed.) *Thematic development in English text* (pp. 55 – 84). London : Pinter
- Brown, G. & Yule, G. (1983). *Discourse analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Christie, F. (2002). *Classroom discourse analysis*. London : Continuum.
- Coffin, C. & Hewings, A. (2005). IELTS as preparation for tertiary writing: Distinctive interpersonal and textual strategies. In L.J. Ravelli, & R.A Ellis, (eds.) *Analysing academic writing* (pp. 153 – 171). London : Continuum.
- Fowler, W. S. & Coe, N. (1976). *Nelson English language texts*. London: Bulter & Tanner.
- 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. (1995). Thematic development and its relationship to registers and genres . In M. Ghadessy, (ed.) *Thematic development in English text* (pp. 129 – 126). London : Pinter
- Halliday, M.A.k. (1985) . *An introduction to functional grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M.A.k. (1994) . *An introduction to functional grammar* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M.A.k. & Matthiessen, C. (1998) . *Systemic functional grammar: A first step into the theory*. Reterived April 18, 2007, from: [http://SFG intro \(peng chapter\) New.htm](http://SFG intro (peng chapter) New.htm).

- McCabe, A (1999). *Theme and thematic patterns in Spanish and English history text*. Doctorial dissertation, Aston: Aston University.
- North, S. (2005). Disciplinary variation in the use of theme in undergraduate essays. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 26, (3), 1-18 .
- Panahi Azar, H (2005). *Gorbahhaye Shahzadah*. Tehran: Motarjam.
- Satari, F. (2007). *Boz Boz Qandi*. Tehran: Maiamin.
- Wang, L. (2007) . Theme and rheme in the thematic organization of text: Implication for teaching academic writing. *Asian EFL Journal*, 9 (1), 1-11.