

## The Status of Theme in Nursing ESP Texts

<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-** This study intended to trace the manifestation of theme as a cohesive marker in the Nursing ESP texts. To this end, fourteen Nursing ESP texts were extracted from Oxford English for Nursing published in 2007 by Oxford University Press and analyzed based on Halliday's (1994) model of thematic organization. The result showed that in this kind of texts, priorities were given to textual over interpersonal, unmarked over marked and simple over multiple theme. The findings of this study are applicable in designing such texts in EFL contexts.

**Key words:** Theme, Nursing ESP texts

### 1. Introduction

In any educational system, there are many vital components such as instructors, learners, textbooks, etc. Among these components, in ESL/EFL educational system, textbooks are the most important component. This importance sourced from that textbooks have the potential to serve several different additional roles such as being effective resources for self-directed learning and material presentation, sources of ideas and activities, and syllabuses where they reflect pre-dominant learning objectives (Cunningsworth, 1995). Hutchinson and Torres believe that textbooks are the most universal elements of teaching without which no teaching-learning situation is complete (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994, p.315).

Texts, to be the important elements of teaching, need to be coherent. Following Halliday and Hassan (1976), to regard a text as coherent, it needs to fulfil some points among which is texture. The concept of texture can help distinguishing texts rather than a collection of unconnected words or clauses. Halliday and Hassan (1976) pointed out that the concept of texture consists of two aspects of structural and non-structural. Non-structural aspect refers to the cohesive markers which tie different elements presented in different sentences such as references, substitutions, ellipses, and conjunctions. Structural aspect refers to inter-sentence or intra-sentence structures like thematic organization which is the focus of this study and thematic progression.

The notion of theme is descended from Systemic Functional Grammar which is articulated by Halliday in

1960s. Systemic Functional Grammar is a grammar model which focuses mainly on the choices that are provided by the grammatical system for language speaker. These choices are pretending to be meaningful and link speakers' intention to concrete form of language. Theme is defined by Halliday (1985, 1994, 2004) as the element in a particular structural configuration taken as a whole, organizes the clause as message; that 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.

Theme has been investigated by many researchers in recent years (Agawa, 2004; Berry, 1989; Denardi, 2006; Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi, 2012; Jalilifar & Khedri, 2011; Lores, 2004; Martinez, 2003; North, 2005). Findings of these studies have illustrated that choices of theme are central to the success of texts. They also showed that text writers need to have conscious awareness about how information should be selected and placed in the first position of the clause. These findings also declared that thematic organization and progression help the creation of links between the clauses, which at the same time endorse cohesion and coherence of the texts and contribute positively to their texture (Berry, 1989; Denardi, 2006).

This study intends to contribute to the existing literature on the use of theme by studying its frequency, distribution and use in Nursing ESP reading texts written by native English speakers.

## 1.1. A rationale for the study

Learners, in EFL context, often have problem in comprehending the reading texts. This problem might be sourced from that writers of the reading texts were not successful “in attempting to help the readers to perceive the coherence of the text by organizing the way in which the meanings are expressed” (Thompson, 1994, p. 147). Thompson (1994) adds that one of the main ways of doing this is theme choices, which directly affects the structure of the clause itself. This study intends to provide Nursing ESP reading text writers, in EFL context, with the information concerning how native English writers use theme to create cohesive Nursing ESP reading texts.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Data

This includes fourteen Nursing ESP reading texts extracted from Oxford English for Nursing published in 2007 by Oxford University Press. The rationale behind this selection was to have a data which is representative of Nursing ESP reading texts produced by successful writers, or as Mauranen (1996) called “good text”. She states the following:

“We here take the typical native speaker user in edited and published texts as a criterion for acceptable use, and regard any text that meets this criterion as ‘good’. In this way, all L1 texts in the material are good texts by definition. Even though they cannot be held up as ideal models, their typical features can be used as a guide to the working with text in that language (p. 213).”

### 2.2 Analytical Model

To analyze the gathered data for theme types, Halliday’s (1985, 1994) model of thematic organization including *topical, textual, interpersonal, simple, multiple, marked, and unmarked* themes was used.

Halliday (1994) categorizes the elements which occur in the thematic position of the clause as follow:

1. Topical theme which covers nominal groups, prepositional phrases, or adverbial groups.  
Example: **The baby** was not going to wait.
2. Textual theme which includes conjunctions, conjunctive adjuncts, and continuatives.  
Example: **However**, degenerative brain diseases are very common in old age.
3. Interpersonal theme: This type encompasses modal adjuncts, finite operators, and imperative let's.

Example: **Sometimes** a murderer cleans the crime scene very carefully.

Another categorization used in this study was Halliday’s (1994, p. 44) distinction between marked and unmarked themes:

1. Marked theme: In this type, thematic position is occupied by prepositional phrases, adverbial groups, and complements that are nominal groups which don’t function as grammatical subjects.

Example: **Over the following thirty days**, he gained 24.5 lb (11.1 kg).

2. Unmarked theme: In this type, thematic position is engaged by participants, extraposition, existential, thematic equatives, processes which function as grammatical subject.

Example: **The droplets** contain viruses that are looking for new homes.

Halliday (1994) classifies themes according to their internal structure into simple and multiple themes.

1. Simple theme: In this type, only a topical theme occupies the thematic position.

Example: **Tamiflu** does not kill H5N1, but stop it making copies of itself.

2. Multiple themes: In this type, beside the topical theme, interpersonal and/or textual themes also occur in the thematic position.

Example: **However, the virus** will continue to mutate, and might become resistant to Tamiflu.

This model was selected since it is the most plausible and updated analytical model compared to other models proposed by Davies (1988), Gosden (1992, 1993), and Berry (1989). In this model, theme is related a) to interpersonal and ideational metafunctions and presents them in the clause initial position and b) to conjunctions and modal adjuncts, the sub-categories of systemic functional grammar (Martinez, 2003).

### 2.3 Unit of Analysis

In this study, t-unit was used as the basic unit of analysis. T-unit is a clause complex which contains one main independent clause together with all the hypotactic clauses which are dependent on it (Fries, 1994 p.318). The selection was due to 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, p. 6).

### 2.4 Procedure

First the fourteen texts were extracted from the Oxford English for Nursing. Second, the gathered texts were analyzed for theme types based on Halliday's (1985, 1994) model of thematic organization. Third, the frequency of theme types was reported and the use of theme types was discussed.

One common problem with text analysis is the risk of making mistakes in interpretation. In this study, taking this problem into account, four texts from the data were randomly selected and verified by two raters who are pursuing their PhD in applied linguistics and agreement was made on the method of analysis.

### 3. Result and Discussion

#### 3.1 Textual and Interpersonal Themes

As shown in table 1, textual theme was used more than interpersonal theme. To Ghadessy (1999), this is due to the use of conjunctions, contributions, coordinators and subordinators functioning as textual theme. Using textual theme makes the text to be argumentative. The result illustrated that in some t-units, two textual themes were used (Example 1). The result showed that the used textual

themes were of two kinds: one internal, and the other external. Internal textual themes such as 'and' and 'but' (Example 2 & 3) give information about the organization or function of the text; and external textual themes such as 'however' and 'then' (Example 4 & 5) express logical relations which hold in the world outside the text (Whittaker, 1995).

Example 1: **And so** he shot the neighbor to defend himself.

Example 2: **And** nurses go to school to learn how to read doctors' handwriting.

Example 3: **But** Isabel had to be rushed to the Accident & Emergency department of their local hospital.

Example 4: **However**, they tend to form letters of the alphabet badly.

Example 5: **Then**, people will believe that their symptoms are not imaginary.

Concerning interpersonal theme, the result showed that this theme was underestimated suggesting the higher impersonality and factuality of these texts. One reason behind this is that, unlike textual theme, interpersonal theme can be placed later in the clause.

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Textual and Interpersonal theme types

Theme Types	Textual	Interpersonal
Nursing ESP Texts	86 (27%)	12 (4%)

#### 3.2 Simple and Multiple

The gathered data were analyzed for the applied simple and multiple theme types and result is presented in table 2. The result showed that writers mostly focused on including simple theme in the theme position. This finding is in line with the earlier ones reported by Ghadessy (1999, 1995), and Coffin and Hewings (2005). More inclination towards

the use of simple theme might indicate the tendency of these writers to establish knowledge merely about the subject (Example 6 & 7).

Example 6: **Pain** is a vital part of our body's defenses.

Example 7: **The main symptom of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS)** is an overwhelming feeling of tiredness.

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of Simple and Multiple theme types

Theme Types	Simple	Multiple
Nursing ESP Texts	232 (72%)	90 (28%)
Total t-units	322 (100)	

#### 3.3 Marked and Unmarked

The result of data analysis in terms of marked and unmarked theme types illustrated the more dispositions towards unmarked theme. This theme occupies 81% of the total thematic positions. This illustrates the theme/subject compliance which indicates the structural simplicity of these texts. More use of unmarked theme results in texts which are less argumentative in nature. To Halliday (1994), more use of unmarked theme in texts shows that there is no prior context leading up to it, and no positive reason for choosing anything else. In the analyzed texts, this kind of

theme was used to provide information about the participants (human, non-human, interactive) (Example 8-10) introduced in the text.

Example 8: **Nurses** can specialize in many different fields.

Example 9: **The company** also said their food was 'nutritious and good for you'.

Example 10: **We** give everyone opportunities to discuss their fears about death and dying.

Marked theme, the other theme types, was used in 19% of the total thematic positions. This theme was mostly applied to organize the text chronologically (Example 11).

Marked theme also used to indicate the relationship between the clauses in terms of condition (Example 12), place (Example 13), cause (Example 14), means (Example 15).

Example 11: **In 1999**, an American cardiologist wrote a prescription so badly that the pharmacist gave a patient the wrong medicine.

Example 12: **If the body is already damaged**, pain helps with healing because it makes us protect our injuries.

Example 13: **In Britain**, every nurse is on a grade.

Example 14: **From blood at the scene of a crime**, police can learn about the person the blood came from.

Example 15: **Using blood pattern analysis**, police can learn a lot about what happened from the shape of the blood drops.

Table 3: Frequency and Percentage of Marked and Unmarked theme types

Theme Types	Marked	Unmarked
Nursing ESP Texts	62 (19%)	260 (81%)
Total t-units	322 (100)	

#### 4. Conclusion and Implication

This study aimed at shedding the light on how native English writers use theme as a cohesive marker to develop an ESP reading text. The result showed that these writers use textual theme to create internal and external relationship between the presented information in the text. They also underestimate interpersonal theme to make their texts more argumentative. In case of marked and unmarked, the used marked to organize their text from time, place, conditional perspectives. They also used unmarked to provide information concerning the text's participants. Concerning the simple and multiple theme types, it was found that they prefer to give information about the subject. Findings of this study could help syllabus designer to design a cohesive Nursing ESP reading texts.

#### References

- [1]. 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>.
- [2]. Berry, M. (1989). Thematic options and success in writing. In M. Ghadessy (Eds.), *Thematic development in English text* (pp. 105 – 128). London : Pinter.
- [3]. Cunningsworth, A. (1995). *Choosing your coursebook*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- [4]. 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.
- [5]. Davies, F. (1988). Reading between the lines: Thematic choices as a device for presenting writers viewpoint in academic discourse. *The Especialist*, 9(2), 173-200.
- [6]. Denardi, D. (2006). Cohesion and thematic structure: self-based analysis of academic abstracts
- [7]. theme, Retrieved May 18, 2011, from: <http://www.ucm.es/info/circulo/no7/mccabe.htm>
- [8]. Ebrahimi, S. F., & Ebrahimi, S. J. (2012). Cohesion in Iranian English textbooks . *Language in India*, 12(4), 87-99.
- [9]. Fries, P.H. (1994). Theme, method of development, and texts . *World Englishes* , 21(2), 317- 359.
- [10]. Fries, P. H., & Francis, G. (1992). Exploring theme: Problems for research. *Occasional Papers in Systemic Linguistics*, 6, 45-60.
- [11]. Ghadessy, M. (1995). Thematic development and its relationship to registers and genres . In M. Ghadessy (Eds.), *Thematic development in English text* (pp. 105 – 128). London : Pinter.
- [12]. Ghadessy, M. (1999) . Thematic organization in academic articles abstracts. *Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad Complutense*, 7, 141-161 .
- [13]. Gosden, H. (1992). Discourse functions of marked theme in scientific research articles. *Journal of English for Specific Purposes*, 11, 207-224 .
- [14]. Gosden, H. (1993). Discourse functions of subject in scientific research articles. *Applied Linguistics*, 14(1), 56-75.
- [15]. Halliday, M.A.k. (1985) . *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Britain: Edward Arnold.
- [16]. Halliday, M.A.k. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar* (2nd ed.). London: Britain Edward Arnold.
- [17]. Halliday, M.A.k. (2004). *An Introduction to functional grammar* (3rd ed.). London: Britain Edward Arnold.
- [18]. Halliday, M.A.k., & Hasan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.
- [19]. Hutchinson, T., & Torres, E. (1994). The textbook as agent of change. *ELT Journal*, 48(4), 315- 327.
- [20]. Jalilifar, A.R., & Khedri, M. (2011). Thematic development in English and translated Academic text. In A. R. Jalilifar & E. Abdollahzadah (Eds.), *Academic research genre in Asian context* (pp. 335 – 364). Ahwaz: Shahid Chamran University Press.

- [21]. Lores, R. (2004). On RA abstracts: From rhetorical structure to thematic organization. *Journal of English for Specific Purposes*, 23, 280-302.
- [22]. 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.
- [23]. Mauranen, A. (1996). Discourse competences-evidence from thematic development in native and non-native texts. In E. Ventola & A. Mauranen (Eds.), *Academic writing: Intercultural and textual issues* (pp. 195-230). Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- [24]. North, S. (2005). Disciplinary variation in the use of theme in undergraduate essays. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 26 (3), 1-18.
- [25]. Thompson, G. (1994). *Introducing functional grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.
- [26]. 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.