

# On the Theme-rheme Theory and Its Application in English Writing

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**Abstract.** Writing, as one of the important productive skills, has long been a giant headache for both students and teachers in English teaching and learning, though both of them have made great efforts. Aiming at the problems and considering the limitations of some different writing theories, the author puts forward a new perspective to change the current situation in English writing and teaching. The paper reveals there are three main problems in college students' writing and two main causes for their poor writings. Meanwhile, it discusses the theme-rheme theory and several types of thematic progression pattern through examples. After employing the theme-rheme theory in teaching and a lot of writing practice, the author considers that theme-rheme theory is helpful and works especially well in guiding students to change dull sentence structures and produce coherent writing. To some extent, students have more interest in writing and most of them succeed in avoiding the problems and make much progress in writing.

**Keywords:** Theme-rheme theory; Thematisation; Thematic progression pattern; English writing

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, with the reform of the foreign language teaching methods, college students (non-English majors) are increasingly interested in English learning and have acquired a high level of proficiency in English, especially in reading, listening and speaking. Comparatively speaking, they have made little advancement in English writing, and important productive skill. Why? The writing skill is often regarded as the most difficult language skill since it requires a higher level of productive skill and the ability of language control than the other skills. Additionally, in the writing careful planning and revision are needed, processes in which make themselves worried and create anxiety [1]. Many learners find it is difficult because they have nothing to write about or they have no idea on how to write. As a result, they show no confidence in any writing tasks. Meanwhile, when teachers teach the writing course, they also find it is difficult because there doesn't exist any teaching resources to go to, and the marking of the composition looks like a monster of some sort. All of the problems have hindered the effective teaching and learning of writing.

Regarding these problems, experts and scholars come up with many new ideas about how to teach writing such as process-oriented approach and genre-based approach, which are very helpful. But maybe they are not the whole story. Here we'd like to offer what we have found based on our teaching experience and the analysis of our students' writings. It is hoped that the findings about English writing can be of great use to both students and teachers.

## 2. Typical Problems in College Students' Writing and Its Causes

After analyzing the compositions of 85 students, I find that the typical problems in their writing can be summarized as follows:

- a. Repetitive words and sentence structures.
- b. Lack of coherence between sentences and paragraphs.
- c. Poor ordering of thoughts.

In terms of their education background and foundation of English learning, we think these problems are caused mainly by the following two factors.

(1) Traditional language teaching methodology. On one hand, some teachers put too much emphasis on vocabulary and grammar, which are only part of language learning. They fail to guide students to learn a language as a whole-not only to master language knowledge but also develop

language competence. In this case, it is natural that students have no idea of how to create global unity in writing. Just as Zamel [2] put it: “what is particularly striking about these ESL teachers’ response... is that the teachers overwhelmingly view themselves as language teachers rather than writing teachers. They attend primarily to surface-level features of writing and seem to read and react to a text as a series of separate sentences or even clauses, rather than a whole unit of discourse.”

On the other hand, the dominant teaching method for writing classes has been product-oriented. The teacher often describes some of certain writing skills and then assigns a topic for practice. Students finish it individually after class and hand their writing in to their teacher for grading. The teacher examines the composition with various symbols for the corrections or incorrections, sometimes with added comments, focusing on its form instead of its content. This approach works well in the teaching situations in Chinese, but it cannot help students to learn about writing in English [3].

Of course, in order to achieve communicative power and long-lasting effect in the written passage has, it is necessary to choose the proper words, the use of cohesive devices, grammatical structures, spelling, and punctuation, etc. That’s to say, in the writing process the bottom-up features should be pay more attention. But for our students, a top-down approach plays an important role. In their writing they prefer to write by emphasizing on the content, the organization, and the structure of the written passage rather than its linguistic form.

(2) The negative transfer caused by students’ mother tongue and oriental pattern of thinking. For the most part, Chinese is a logically compact language while English is very strict in its structure. In English, nouns and verbs seldom repeat themselves in the same sentence because the unnecessary repetition would seriously influence the quality of the writing, and it would be an enemy of good written English. That’s the reason that such special words as conjunctions, pronouns and other substitutions are used more frequently in English than in Chinese. But students fail to observe the different linguistic phenomena in two languages. As a result, the same words and sentence structures are tirelessly repeated in their writing. They seem to have no idea of how to make a change, let alone pay attention to cohesion and coherence of how to make a change, let alone pay attention to cohesion and coherence of discourse.

### 3. Solution to the Problems

#### 3.1 Brief Introduction to Theme-rheme Theory

**3.1.1 Actual Division of the Sentence.** According to Huang Guowen [4], the term “theme” refers to the left-most constituent of the sentence. Generally, there is a theme and a rheme in each simple sentence. The theme is what speakers/writers use as what Halliday calls a “point of departure” [5]. For example,

(1) Tom is a teacher.

(2) In the classroom Tom is learning English.

In (1) “Tom” is the theme and the left is the rheme while in (2) “in the classroom” is the theme (marked) and the left is the rheme. “Tom” is an unmarked theme because it acts as the subject of the sentence while “in the classroom” is a marked theme because it doesn’t act as the grammatical subject but it occurs as the theme of the sentence.

The actual division of the sentence tries to divide a sentence into two parts from communicative perspective and information distribution. The theme is the topic and point of passage while the rheme explains or describes the theme; the theme is usually the given information while the rheme is new. This division is different from the traditional division of the sentence based on the different grammatical functions of the words in a sentence such as subject, verb and object. The actual division of the sentence is of great significance to the study of coherent text structure and inter-sentential relationship.

**3.1.2 Thematisation.** The term thematisation refers to the process in which a word is put in the very beginning of a sentence and it serves as the theme of the sentence [6]. In other words, thematisation means the discourse process by which a referent would be developed as the central subject of the

discourse like “Tom” in the example (1) and “in the classroom” in (2). Unlike the process of linear organization, thematisation is a discursive process rather than simply a sentential process.

**3.1.3 Thematic Progression Pattern.** As we know every sentence has its own thematic structure. Generally a text consists of at least two sentences and the themes and rhemes of these successive sentences are related to one another. But they are not always the same. With the change and progression of these themes, the text gradually develops into a whole unit with sense. Thematic organization is widely used by writers because it would keep their main intention. Through providing a structural framework for their discourse, it shows a perspective on what follows. It is very helpful to the clear identification of topic and the organization of structure.

According to Huang Guowen [4], there are six patterns of thematic progressions, but only four are offered here since they are especially helpful to our students’ writing. The first two work well in guiding the writing of argumentation and Pattern (3) in description and Pattern (4) in narrative.

Pattern (1) Theme1→rheme1, theme1→rheme2, theme1→rheme3...

Pattern (2) T1---R1, T2(=R1)---R2, T3(=R1)---R3...

Pattern (3) T1---R1, T2(=R1)---R2, T3(=R2)---R3...

Pattern (4) T1---R1, T2---R2(=T1), T3---R3(=T2)...

### 3.2 How to Apply Theme-rheme Theory to Writing.

Aimed at problems existing in students’ writing and considering features of theme-rheme theory, we offer the following suggestions in English writing teaching and learning.

**3.2.1 Proper Use of Marked Themes in Writing** Making proper use of marked themes in writing, which definitely can change dull sentence structures. A written text with unmarked themes is easy to interpret which a text with marked ones is expressive and cohesive. In teaching writing, try to expose students to different stylistic versions of the same sentence or text, so that they can understand what options they have and how these options fit into their writing.

In English there is a very wide range of syntactic forms which can be used by the speaker/ writer to convey the same propositional or cognitive content. For example,

(1) a. Mary was killed by John in the park.

b. John killed Mary in the park.

c. In the park John killed Mary. (Marked theme)

d. It was Mary who was killed by John.

The above four sentences have the same propositional content but with different themes and rhemes, and therefore different focus and emphasis. Example (a) is interpreted as a message about Mary; (b) is about John; (c) is more likely to be about the where the action took place while (d) seems to answer a question and focuses on Mary. From these examples, we can sense the changes which reflect the concerns of the clause. A writer can choose one according to his own intention to express his idea accurately. Sometimes it’s not a must to use the grammatical subject as the theme of a sentence. We can make some changes in order to avoid repetitive sentence structures. Please see the following case in point from McCarthy [7]:

(2) a.—a text with unmarked themes

Dear Amy,

Today I’m sitting in the classroom and writing to you. A big lawn surrounded by trees is outside the window and a flower bed is in the middle of the lawn. There are many roses and tulips in the spring. I am sure you’d love my campus. Please come and enjoy the scenery; we’ll have a good time.

Yours sincerely,

Sally

b.—a text with proper use of marked themes

Dear Amy,

Today I’m sitting in the classroom and writing to you. Outside window is a big lawn surrounded by trees, and in the middle of the lawn is a flower bed. There are many roses and tulips in the spring. I am sure you’d love my campus. Please come and enjoy the scenery; we’ll have a good time.

Yours sincerely,  
Sally

Compare the two versions, it is clear that readers prefer version (b) to (a). In version (b), the proper use of marked themes not only marks rich sentence structures but also a more closely-connected text while version (a) is too monotonous. Nevertheless, it is necessary to present these different versions to students so that they can, by means of comparison, be aware of the importance of appropriate use of any writing technique.

**3.2.2 Effective Use of Thematic Progression Patterns** Taking advantage of thematic progression patterns to effectively help put thoughts in proper order, get rid of the negative transfer to some degree and produce coherent texts. Once a student takes the task of creating a written text for communication purposes, firstly he should organize his/ her thoughts into a sequence. In this sequence, each sentence is important and it is related to both the previous and the following sentences, and creates, at the same time, the basis for the connection with the following one. So coherence, as a feature of a text, is very important, which is closed with the top-down planning and organization. As we all known, the narrative is structured style, which focuses on the chronological development of events and is centered around a person. So students can easily write something related to the person involved. However, in CET-4 writing, students are required to write an argumentation, which is a logical organization and is usually objective and factual in nature. Clearly, when developing the coherence in writing, it is necessary to have a little difference. What's more, most students have difficulty in developing sentences into a coherent whole. In this case, it is a good way to use thematic progression patterns to create coherence in a written text.

Thematic progression patterns reveal the semantic relation between sentences. If students apply them to their writing, it will be easy for readers to be conscious of what the writer wants to say, how the topic is developed and so on. According to our practice, Pattern (1) and (2) work well in guiding students' writing of argumentation. By following these two patterns, students, especially those who are poor in organizing their ideas, can avoid the disorder of ideas and easily keep their writing to the point. The following is an example. The students are asked to write a composition of about 100 words based on the title and topics.

How do you finance your college education?

- 1) The ways of financing the college education
- 2) The reasons of the better way for you to finance the college education

Compare the following two paragraphs (both are the first paragraph of the composition) written respectively by a top student and a poor one.

a. "How to finance our college education has become a matter of concern for many. We can deal with it in many different ways according to different situations. We can get all the money from our parents if they can afford. We can apply for a loan especially for us college students. We can also earn the money by ourselves, doing a full-time job in summer or winter vacation. Anyway the most important is to find a solution that suits us."

b. "The tuition and fees are very expensive. But we can get it in many ways. For example, we can through our parents to get it, also we can earn money out of class to get it. And even we can through the school get it. We can also borrow it from a bank."

Both students follow Pattern (1) of the thematic progression and do a good job in organizing their thoughts. They are different in that the former has a good command of English and can control language to his advantage while the latter is much influenced by his (her) mother tongue in the course of writing and thus makes a lot of mistakes. What he should do is to learn how to develop words into sentences.

### 3.2.2 Some Notes in Employing Theme-rheme Theory

It is believed that traditional teaching methods of English writing have a lot of limitations. The theme-rheme theory provides a good alternative to solving the problems in English writing. However, everything has two sides. The following should be noted in practice:

(1) Overuse of marked themes will inevitably result in unnaturalness or even misunderstanding. Still we use McCarthy's case [7] to illustrate the point. The following is a version of exaggerated

marked themes:

Dear Amy,

Me, I'm sitting here in the classroom writing to you. What's outside my window is a big lawn surrounded by trees and it's a flower bed that is in the middle of the lawn. When it was full of roses and tulips was in the spring. I am sure you'd love it. It's you who must come and stay for a period of time; we'll have a good time.

Yours,

Sally

Obviously this version is too awkward and unnatural due to too many marked themes.

(2) Sometimes using thematic progression patterns doesn't necessarily guarantee producing a coherent text or writing. For example,

"Mr. Wang was born in Beijing. Beijing is the capital of China. China is developing very fast and will become one of the most powerful countries in the world."

This paragraph follows Pattern (3) but it is not coherent in meaning. Thematic progression is one way to develop a text but global coherence is the most important for a text. Sometimes a paragraph or text can still be coherent even if it doesn't follow thematic patterns. So make sure to make proper use of these writing techniques when necessary.

(3) If the process-focused approach is used in a writing class, the theme-rheme theory can be used to guide drafting and revising rather than prewriting. In the prewriting period, brainstorming and listing are preferable, which can activate students' thinking. After they come up with some good ideas, students need to organize their ideas in the period of drafting. At this time, teachers had better not ask students to focus on grammar rules and proper choice of words, which can be left to the revising period. Usually revision tends to be made at the word, phrase and sentence level. But in order to achieve global coherence, to revise not merely at the surface or local level, but at the global level as well, with the help of theme-rheme theory is the best policy. By doing so, students can make a breakthrough in writing.

#### 4. Conclusions

After one-term writing practice guided mainly by the theme-rheme theory, the positive effect is obvious. Those top students can handle thematisation and different thematic progression patterns quite freely and make proper use of both marked and unmarked themes in their writing; those average ones grasp more techniques to effectively deal with the original big headaches such as how to develop paragraphs and create a thread that holds the text together and create unity; in addition, those relatively poor in writing have more confidence and can organize their thoughts much better than before. For one thing, the students think of writing from a new perspective and thus have more interest in writing. For another, most of them succeed in avoiding the problems mentioned in Part II and make much progress in writing.

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