

The Status of Theme in the IELTS Task 2 Essays

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ABSTRACT: *This study analyzed the thematic organization types in the Task 2, essays, of the writing section of the IELTS test. To meet this end, thirty Task 2 essays with a score of 8 and 8.5 were selected. Then, the data were analyzed based on Halliday's (1994) model of thematic organization. The findings revealed that the selections of the theme types were directly imposed by the nature of the genre of essay writing. This means that the writers were required to select the theme types in a way which help meeting the general goals of this genre. The findings could be used in the IELTS preparation writing classes to help the writers, especially EFL novice writers, to achieve satisfactory scores in the Task 2, essays, of the writing section of the IELTS test.*

Keywords: *Theme, Rheme, Thematic organization, Task 2 writing, IELTS, Genre*

INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, the IELTS test has gained an increasing importance in university systems around the world. In Australia, for instance, it is now the only test accepted by all universities and is often referred to as the 'preferred' test (Coley, 1999, P.10). The IELTS is one of the few English language proficiency tests in which the listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills of examinees are assessed and reported on. The writing skill requires examinees to do two Tasks in 60 minutes. In Task 1, examinees write a short description of information presented in the form of a table, diagram etc. In Task 2, examinees should write an essay in response to a question or proposition. Test's designers illustrated that examinees in their responses to the requirement of Task 2 should 'provide general factual information, outline and/or present solution, justify an opinion, and evaluate ideas and evidence' (UCLES, 2002). In the present study, researchers decided to focus merely on Task 2 essay. This decision was partly motivated by the heavier weighting of this Task on the test and the greater attention that it receives in test preparation classes. In addition, the focus on Task 2 was sourced from fact that it has a major influence on students' emerging understandings of what academic writing fundamentally infold.

There is a large volume of published studies on the writing section of the IELTS test. These studies have concentrated on the role of argument in IELTS writing (Coffin, 2004) and the washback of IELTS tests on the education systems and societies in which they operate (Green,

2006, 2007). In addition, Moore and Morton (2005) compared IELTS essay writing and university writing. More recently, Dickinson (2013) shed the light on the adaptation of a genre-based framework to help learners prepare for the essay writing section of the IELTS test. Literature reviews have indicated that no study has been carried out on the linguistic features used in the writing section of the IELTS test. Thus, this study aims to shed the light on theme as one of the linguistic features by analyzing the thematic organization types in the Task 2 essay of the writing section of the IELTS test.

Method of Analysis

Data

This study was carried out on a data of 30 Task 2 essays. These Task 2 essays came from the publicly available IELTS materials with score band of 8 and 8.5. The particulars of the data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Particulars of the data

<i>Number of Task 2 Essays</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Length of Task 2 Essays</i>	<i>251-376</i>
<i>Total number of words of Task 2 Essays</i>	<i>8701</i>
<i>Total number of Thematic progression types</i>	<i>541</i>

The data selection was based on three criteria: genre, English for Academic purposes (EAP) and text type. Essay writing (Task 2 essays of the IELTS test in this study) qualifies as a genre on its own satisfying the first criterion. To meet the second, Task 2 essays from the academic IELTS test were selected. Lastly, to meet the third criterion, this study focused on the Task 2 essays of the IELTS test as a text type which contains peculiar linguistic features.

Framework

More than 160 years ago, Weil (1844, p. 29) first defined the concept of theme as one of two divisions of the message structure:

“There is then a point of departure, an initial notion which is equally present to him who speaks and to him who hears which forms, as it were, the ground upon which the two intelligences meet; and another part of discourse which forms the statement, properly so called. This division is found in almost all we say” (Weil 1844: 29; quoted in Ping 2000 p. 2).

Much later, Halliday (1985) defines theme as the element in a particular structural configuration taken as whole. It organizes the clause as a message and provides the configuration of theme and Rheme. Based on this definition, a clause is made of two parts, theme followed by rheme. Another definition of theme comes from Perez (1999) who defines theme as the starting point of the clause that is grammatically realized in the initial elements in the clause. In addition, he argues that theme serves two main functions. It functions as: a) an orientation point of the clause by connecting it to the preceding stretch of discourse (previous theme or rheme) and at the same time creating coherent discourse, and b) a point of departure by representing rheme, the second segment of the clause. In this study Halliday's (1985) definition of theme is adopted due to the use of Halliday's (1994) models for theme analysis. This could contribute to the validity of the data analysis.

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

1. Topical them: This type covers nominal groups, prepositional phrases, or adverbial groups.

E.g.: ***some people*** say this movement of people around the world is not a new phenomenon.

2. Textual Theme: This type includes conjunctions, conjunctive adjuncts, and continuatives.

E.g.: ***However***, this is seldom the case.

3. Interpersonal Theme: This type encompasses modal adjuncts, finite operators, and imperatives.

E.g.: ***personally, I*** fundamentally agree with their assertion for three reasons.

According to Halliday (1994), among the three kinds of theme, topical theme is an obligatory theme and textual and interpersonal themes are optional themes.

Another categorization used in this study was Halliday's (1994, p. 44) distinction between marked and unmarked topical themes in the declarative clause:

1. Marked topical theme: In this type, thematic position is occupied by prepositional phrases, adverbial groups, and complements that are nominal groups which do not function as grammatical subject.

E.g.: ***In conclusion***, I believe that we cannot change the fact that both parents have to work nowadays.

2. Unmarked topical theme: In this type, thematic position is engaged by participants (subjects), extraposition (it), existential (there), thematic equatives (e.g., what is important now is to analyze

the results), or processes (e.g., conceptualising WTC as a dynamic system) which function as grammatical subject.

E.g.: ***It*** may be challenging for society to allow differences of opinion out into the open.

Halliday (1994) classifies themes, in the declarative clause, according to their internal structure using the notion of simple and multiple themes.

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

E.g.: ***There*** are many effects of this growing illiteracy rate.

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

E.g.: ***Therefore, something*** should be done as soon as possible to protect people from negative effects of the internet.

This model was selected on the grounds that it is the most plausible analytical model compared to other models proposed by Davies (1988), Gosden (1992, 1993), and Berry (1989). In this model, theme is related to interpersonal and ideational metafunctions and presents them in the clause initial position (Martinez, 2003).

Unit of Analysis

In this study, only main clauses were analyzed for their thematic organization. This enables a clear display of the thematic organization used in the Task 2 essays without having to focus on the secondary organization of text (Gosden, 1993). In this concern, Halliday (1985) argues that main clause's theme makes the major contribution in the method of development of the text. To Fries and Francis (1992) and Berry (1989), examining only the main clause because of its significance could help knowing the text organization and increase the genre awareness.

Procedure

The procedure of analysis follows a few steps. First, the Task 2 essays were stored into word files and word count run on them. Second, the data were analyzed based on Halliday's (1994) model of thematic organization. Initial analysis is verified by two raters who are pursuing their PhD in English language studies. Once concordance was established, the researchers proceeded with the rest of the analysis. Third, the frequency and percentage of thematic organization types of the data were calculated and tabulated. Finally, manifestations of theme types were discussed.

Results and Discussion

Theme Types

The data were analyzed for the frequency of different theme types and the findings are presented in Table 2. All theme types were manifested in the analyzed data.

Marked and Unmarked Topical Themes

The data were analyzed for the topical theme types, marked and unmarked. The finding showed that the unmarked, compared to the marked theme, was manifested three times more. The greater use of the unmarked theme suggests that the topical theme occupied both thematic and subject positions. Theme/subject compliance may be indicative of structural simplicity of Task 2 essays. This finding supports Halliday's (1994) idea that writers mostly prefer placing theme in the subject position of the clause. He added that the unmarked theme is used in the text if there is no prior context leading up to it, or no positive reason for choosing anything else. Unmarked themes also give continuity to the texts and maintain coherence between sentences. In other words, the theme or rheme of the previous clause is used in the thematic position of the next clause and this connects the clause together.

As to the unmarked theme, the finding was greater than that reported by Jalilifar (2009). He analyzed the Applied Linguistics textbooks and found 61% of the unmarked theme. This difference could be discussed based on the level of language proficiency of the writers. Applied Linguistics textbooks are written by expert writers therefore they used less unmarked and more marked to create a more argumentative texts. But this was not the case in the analyzed data in this study in which writers were showed a greater tendency to unmarked theme as to ensure that their sentences are grammatically correct and their structure are simple and could be easily figured out by the readers. The finding was less than that reported by Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi (2012). This could be discussed based on the nature of the data analyzed in these two studies. In the study conducted by Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi (2012) the focus was on narrative compositions written by undergraduate students in which writers inclination to the unmarked theme is not surprising. But this was not the case in the analyzed data in this study which are argumentative in nature. This nature requires writers to have less inclination towards the unmarked theme.

In regard to the marked theme, the finding suggests that this theme was used to serves some discourse functions. This means that the writers of the IELTS task 2 essays intend to put some elements that frequently indicate notions such as validation, location in discourse, time or space, and writer's viewpoints into the theme position. These elements, mostly found at the sentences boundaries, commonly have the function of textual organization, like signaling changes and turning to real world and discourse circumstances. It is recognition of these internal signals that helps identify the rhetorical moves of the IELTS Task 2 essays.

The finding in relation to the manifestation of the marked theme was in the same line with the earlier findings reported by Martinez (2003) and Jalilifar (2010). This could be justified based on argumentative nature of the academic writing in general.

In sum, it seems that in the IELTS preparation writing classes students need to become aware of the impact of using these two theme types on the essay. Students must keep in mind, that fronting is a powerful resource to highlight adverbial or objects and that this fronting acts as a focused manner of organizing information in the clause.

Simple and Multiple

The finding in Table 2 concerning the realization of the simple and multiple theme were inconsistent with findings that have been reported earlier by Jalilifar (2009, 2010), Ebrahimi (2008) and Ebrahimi, Chan and Tan (2012). They found that the simple theme outrun the multiple theme for three to five times. More use of the simple theme in these studies might indicate that writers prefer to use more simple sentences in their writings. Another plausible reason for the more indication of the writers is that the textual theme is a theme which could be used in the rheme section of the clause.

The more use of the multiple theme in this study in comparison with the studies listed above could indicate that writers of the IELTS Task 2 essays prefer to thematize the textual and interpersonal themes in order to clearly show the status of the sentences in relation to each others. Thematizing the textual theme could clearly help the readers to show the comparative, contrastive and additive relation between the clauses. This might be imposed by the argumentative nature of this genre. This finding might also suggest that the IELTS task 2 writings are written with greater rhetorical consciousness and this is in contrast with the above listed studies in which writers override to concern to establish knowledge about the subject, rather than synthesize arguments and analyze from different sources. A greater use of the multiple theme in the IELTS task 2 writings may propose that in addition to the textual purpose, there is a preference to include the interpersonal theme to the topical theme to create continuity and cohesion between the clauses in the text. The reasons behind the importance of multiple theme from the cohesion perspective are as follow: 1) it may contain more cohesive elements at the same time as they signal the thematic perspective of the sentence in producing cohesive text (Hasselgard, 2000), 2) it creates overlaps in thematic progression in so far as it links a clause to the proceeding clause (Hawes & Thomas, 1997), and 3) it is a useful guide to the rhetorical path that the writer is following (Bloor & Bloor, 1995).

Textual and Interpersonal

As shown in Table 2, writers of the IELTS Task 2 essays displayed greater tendency towards employing the textual theme in comparison with the interpersonal theme creating cohesive and factual essays with an impersonal tone. This was in the same line with Ebrahimi and Khedri's (2011), McCabe's (1999), Ghadessy's (1999) and Whittaker's (1995) findings. Ghadessy (1999) believes that this finding is not surprising since in most texts, there are plenty of conjunctions, coordinators, and subordinators functioning as textual theme. As with Ghadessy (1999),

Whittaker (1995) says that this is quite reasonable, since academic writing tend to be impersonal and objective and at the same time aims at persuading readers to read. Martinez (2003) states that the possible reason behind low proportion of the interpersonal theme are two folds: 1) Writers may not be aware that the textual signals could be placed later in the sentence and 2) When more than one interpersonal theme appears, only one attitude is emphasized; this is not the case with the textual theme. Here, it is possible to find two textual themes; one internal, and the other external. Whittaker points out that the internal textual theme gives information about the organization or function of the text e.g. ‘and’ and ‘but’; and the external textual theme, expresses logical relations which hold in the world out side the text e.g. ‘thus’ and ‘then’ (1995). Martinez added that the textual theme could also be metaphorical in the same way as the interpersonal theme is (2003). The worthy point was that in all the analyzed essays, writers mostly used the textual theme to create external relationship or what is called by Whittaker (1995) to create relationship in the world.

Finding of this study in relation to the textual theme was more than that reported by Jalilifar (2009, 2010) and McCabe (1999). This might allude to the more argumentative, impersonal, and objective nature of the IELTS task 2 essays. This finding might also suggest that in writing the IELTS task 2 essays; writers resorted to the textual theme to link each clause to the surrounding text and context. It also shows their ability to take a more authoritative stance in their essays or to reflect that their essays are rhetorical processes rather than treating theme merely as transparent medium for reporting realities.

This finding in relation to the interpersonal theme was in contrast with studies conducted by researchers such as Martinez (2003) and Jalilifar (2010). These contrasts could be explained in terms of genre differences. Little inclination of the IELTS task 2 writers to the interpersonal theme might show these writers’ preference in presenting and reporting facts or what McCabe (1999) called “a mirror of reality”. Another plausible reason for the little inclination to the interpersonal theme might be the impersonal nature of the argumentative essays.

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of the Theme types

	<i>Theme type</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	<i>Marked theme</i>	129	24%
2	<i>Unmarked theme</i>	412	76%
3	<i>Simple theme</i>	290	54%
4	<i>Multiple theme</i>	251	46%
5	<i>Textual theme</i>	146	26%

6	<i>Interpersonal theme</i>	5	1%
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Conclusion and Implication

In this study, the aim was to scrutinize the thematic organization types used in IELTS task 2 essays. The findings illustrated that IELTS task 2 writers used all the theme types in their essays. The findings revealed that the nature of the IELTS Task 2 essays imposed writers in the selection of the theme types. These findings are not surprising as the purposes of each genre require writers to use linguistic features among which theme to meet their general purposes.

Generally, findings suggest that the selection of theme types need to be considered as one of the effective and valuable techniques in teaching essay writing for Task 2 of the IELTS test due to the following points. First, by employing the interpersonal theme, the writer exchanges structure and expresses his or her attitude. Second, by applying the textual theme, the writer can organize the message in the clauses, create texts, and set up a local environment in which the reader can interpret the intended message. Third, by using the multiple theme, the writers can situate more cohesive elements at the theme position while simultaneously signal the thematic perspective of the sentence in producing cohesive text. They also can use this theme to create overlaps in thematic progression in so far as it links a clause to the proceeding clause. Forth, by applying the marked themes, the writer can front elements to highlight adverbial or objects which contribute to the organizing of information in the sentence.

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