

## FACTUALITY IN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' WRITINGS

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### **Abstract:**

The present study aimed to find out the textual 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 reported the similar tendency showed by students towards using textual theme in their compositions. The findings illustrated the importance of textual theme and its types in creating cohesive piece of writing. The findings of this study are applicable in teaching writing skill.

**Key words:** *Theme, textual theme, composition writing*

### **Introduction:**

In order to help students to improve their reading and writing skills, they need to be aware of the organizational patterns of text. Among such basic patterns are theme-rheme patterns in the clause's organization. Organization of the message in the clause is a major problem which must be solved if the act of communication is to be successful. So a clause is organized as a message by having a special status assigned to one part of it. 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.

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).

Agawa (2004, p. 11) suggests that for ESL students to improve their reading and writing skills, they need to be aware of the implicit organizational patterns of texts. Wang (2007, p. 8) points out that cohesion in student's writing can be improved dramatically if attention is given to theme selection and thematic progression in text. Berry (1989, p. 71) studied the thematic structure of the children's writing and argued 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.

A number of studies have been carried out to find out thematic organization and progression in student's writing. Coffin and Hewings (2003) studied the notion of theme and appraisal in the non-native students' writings. They analyzed 56 essays ranging in length from approximately 230 to 280 words. The essays were written by non-native speakers preparing to enter English medium higher education. Each of the essays was analyzed using the tool of theme and appraisal (p.157).

The result showed some interesting points, one interesting point showed by the data analysis was the subjectivity of the argument out forward, namely through the use of thematized pronounce resources, is at odds with the view of academic argument as a dispassionate and objective process (p.167).

Belmonte and McCabe (1998, pp. 15-26) attempted to show that the notion of theme/rheme can be very helpful as an instructional tool for the teacher to evaluate L2 writing at the level of discourse. They analyzed 25 student compositions in terms of thematic selection and progression. The results confirmed that the theme/rheme construct can be a valuable instrument for teachers when it comes to marking students' writing. It allows them to focus on the level of text, and thereby explain where students are losing effectiveness in their arguments and this is due to problems with thematic progression, selection or both.

Wang (2007) explored the relationship between theme/rheme organization and the cohesion of academic text. A text written by sophomore majoring in politics from South-Eastern University in China was selected and analyzed. The results showed that students' weaknesses in their arguments are due to problems with either thematic progression or thematic selection, or both. Therefore, if students receive instruction on theme/rheme structure, they can improve the textual cohesion of their academic text.

In her study North (2005) used systemic functional approach to analyze essays written by students from different backgrounds. 61 students from an Open University Course in the history of science (*The Rise of*

*Scientific Europe 1550-1800*), during the academic years of 2002-2003, were selected. 33 students had *art* and 28 students had *science* background. As far as they had considerable variation in age, previous academic study, and working experience, a group of ten art students and a group of ten science students were selected as sample, similar in age, gender and formal education backgrounds. The students were asked to produce essays as part of their course assessment. The data contained 65234 words (p. 435). North concluded that thematic choices in the students' essays reflected different conceptions of knowledge of academic writing which themselves contributed to success in course assessment.

Even though several studies have been done in the area of thematic organization and thematic progression, textual theme and its types in students' writing and its possible relationship with students' level of language proficiency has been neglected. One of the difficulties that Iranian EFL students 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 textual theme and its types and their relation to students' level of language proficiency.

### **Methodology:**

#### **Participants:**

Participants in this study were 90 male and female students majoring in English language translation in Abadan Islamic Azad University. They were divided into three groups- sophomore students (30), junior students (27), and senior 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)*, *Moush Dom Borideh (Tailless Mouse)*, and *Gorbahhaye Shahzadeh (Princess' Cats)*.

#### **Instruments:**

To analyze students' writing thematically, Halliday's (1994) categorization of textual theme and its types were used. According to Halliday (1994) textual theme that includes continuatives (small set of discourse items which signal that a new move is beginning, such as: yes, no, oh...), structural elements (coordinates & subordinates) and conjunctive adjuncts which relate the clause to the preceding texts (e.g., in other words).

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).

### 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.

Finally, to determine the textual theme and its types in students' writing and their 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 the textual theme and 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 use of textual theme and its types *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.

### Result:

As shown in Table 1, students at different levels of language proficiency showed somewhat similar tendency towards textual theme. This finding is not surprising, because in most texts, there are plenty of conjunctions functioning as textual themes. There are also frequent coordinators and subordinators (Ghadessy, (1999). He also mentioned that textual themes persuade the reader to read the text (p.134). This finding also revealed that students use textual themes in their writings to provide more explicit guidance to the reader on how to construct a coherent interpretation of the text. Use of textual theme also might be due to the nature of narrative genre. Comparing this study's finding with textual themes in writing of the native speaker, showed that native speaker used more textual theme, and this might have resulted in more coherence.

Table 1: Frequency and the Percentage of Themes in Iranian EFL Students' Writings

	Elementary (%)	Intermediate (%)	Advanced (%)	Native (%)
Textual theme	727 (22)	707 (22)	662 (24)	32 (25)

In order to see what kind of textual themes was predominantly used by Iranian students in their writings, the frequency of different types of textual themes was obtained. Table 2 delineates frequency types.

The data illustrated that students of all the three levels of language proficiency treated this type of theme somewhat similarly. The most frequently used elements were structural and conjunctive adjunct at the cost of continuatives. That is, students' writings were identified by the structural elements they extremely utilized. An interesting result was gradual increase of conjunctive adjuncts associating directly with language learners' level of proficiency. The result agreed with 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 text books were structural elements (p.221).

The native speaker exclusively utilized structural theme, discarding other textual theme types in his writing. The result revealed that the native speaker and EFL students both extraordinarily rely on structural elements. Conjunctive adjuncts were sporadically used by students while they were neglected by the native speaker, and continuatives were neglected by both. As far as conjunctive adjuncts only set up semantic relationship with what proceeds, and structural elements set up relationship which is semantic and at the same time grammatical, so native speaker's writing appeared more cohesive.

Table 2: Frequency of Textual Themes in Iranian EFL Students' Writings

Textual types	Elementary (%)	Intermediate (%)	Advance (%)	Native Speaker (%)
Structural theme		724 (99)	670 (94)	609 (91) 32 (100)
Conj- adjunct		3 (1)	37 (6)	53 (9) --
Continuative		--	--	-- --

In order to find the potential relationship between students' level of language proficiency and the textual theme used in their writings, the *chi-square* was applied, and the results are presented in table 3. Chi-square analysis showed that there was no significant difference between the three groups in terms of textual theme. This means that there was no systematic increase or decrease across the three groups of language proficiency.

Table 3 Results of Chi-square Test

Theme	frequency	chi-square value	df	sig.
Textual	727			
Theme	707	3.173	2	.205
	662			

Critical value was 5.9915

## Discussion:

The percentage of textual theme was somewhat similar in students' writings. These similarities can be explained in terms of genre. According to Halliday and Hassan (1976), texts belonging to the same genre represent a similar contextual configuration, that is, they show common characteristics in terms of field, mode, and tenor of discourse (p.46). As far as composition writing patterns the same family of genre, then this similarity in students' composition is not surprising.

So similarities in field, tenor, and mode engender similarities in textual choices and are reflected in the thematic choices preferred since the field, tenor, and mode can be realized in topical, interpersonal, and textual themes respectively. Therefore, theme, in this study textual theme, as one of the textual choices provides interesting insight into establishing similarities within and between genres. This is inline with other studies like Ghadessy (1995, 1999), North's (2005), and Whittaker's (1995) findings. These researchers suggested that different types of theme can reveal crucial characteristics of the texts regarding genre.

Concerning composition writing, students used textual theme to highlight the higher impersonality and factuality of their writings. It seems that students in all the three groups know the two functions of textual theme: one internal, giving information about the organization or function of part of the text, the other external, expressing logical relations which hold in the world. Textual theme can also be metaphorical in the same way as interpersonal themes are. The second reason is that students may not be aware that textual signals could be placed later in the sentence.

In case of structural textual theme, Halliday (1994) stated that structural elements set up a relationship which is semantic and at the same time grammatical. North (2005) also stated that structural elements provide more explicit help to the writer in writing a coherent composition. The result showed that in the three levels of language proficiency students showed slight decrease in the use of structural themes. One reason behind this could be that students while passing their writing courses did not receive direct instruction on the importance of structural textual themes. So students may not be aware that structural elements are more important in creating cohesive writings.

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 addition. McCabe (1999) stated that the main function of conjunctive adjuncts is to relate the clause to the preceding text in some way, which is they are retrospective. The result showed that as the structural themes decrease the conjunctive adjuncts increase. One reason may be that students do not know that structural themes are more important than conjunctive adjuncts, because of the retrospective and prospective function of structural themes. Moreover, students may not know that conjunctive adjuncts can be used in initial, middle, and final position of clause.

The result also revealed that the three levels were similar in terms of continuatives. One interesting point in analyzing the students' writings was that continuatives were neglected by students of different levels. 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.

### 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. The result also suggests that textual theme and its types can be effectively applied in classrooms to help students in writings.

The result of the present study will benefit the Iranian EFL students and English language instructors in general and English language students in composition writings in particular. Textual theme awareness can help students to create cohesive composition by using textual theme; the writer can organize the message in the clauses, create texts, and set up a local environment in which the readers can interpret their message.

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