Thematic choice in Chinese college students' English essays

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ABSTRACT

Thematic choice provides clues as to how English learners organize information and shape their essays. This research was based on a comparative study of thematic choices in Chinese and American college students' English essays, using a Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) approach to investigate how Chinese college students make different thematic choices from native speakers, and discusses the pedagogical implications based on the differences found. Chinese college students were found to deviate from native speakers in their thematic choices: They used proportionally fewer topical Themes and significantly more interpersonal Themes in the form of modal adjuncts and mood-marking Themes. Significant differences were also found in marked Themes and textual Themes: Chinese college students used more adjuncts for manner and contingency in marked Themes; they also used more conjunctive adjuncts and fewer conjunctions in textual Themes. These findings revealed that Chinese college students lack knowledge in how Themes function in ordering information and building up the framework of a text and that therefore they should be informed of the importance of the Theme position in organizing meaning, and introduced to alternative thematic choices and strategies in manipulating information by means of activities and writing assignments.

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1. Introduction

The Theme is a major aspect of "how speakers construct their messages in a way which makes them fit smoothly into the unfolding language event" (Thompson, 2014, p. 145). The Theme is the element that serves as the point of departure of the message; it is what locates and orients the clause within its context (Halliday, 2014, p. 89). As a device for organizing meaning, the Theme not only operates at the local level, indicating how the writer has chosen to order information within the clause, but also helps to structure the flow of information in ways that shape interpretation of the text as a whole (Martin, 1992, 1995).

While native speakers of English may have acquired the ability to produce coherent discourse by putting the right kind of information in Theme position (Hawes & Thomas, 2012, p. 175), learners of English as a foreign language are yet to learn how to use Themes appropriately in their English output, so that the reader is always aware of what the key concepts are and how they are being developed (Hyland, 2004).

A comparison of the thematic choices made by Chinese college students and English native speakers will reveal how Chinese college students make thematic choices inappropriately, and will provide a good basis for effective pedagogical applications in terms of helping them make better thematic choices. The Theme is closely linked with nominalization and

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logical connectors (discourse markers), phenomena particularly relevant to ESP (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Robinson, 1991); thus the study of thematic choices in college students' English essays is "a useful entry point for an investigation of emergent disciplinarity" which may "reveal disciplinary differences encoded in the language itself" (North, 2005, p. 433).

2. Literature review

English learners have a number of decisions to make in terms of thematic choices when they write in English, such as what to make more or less prominent within a text (North, 2005, p. 434) and how to relate segments to one another (Jalilifar, 2010, p. 32). While discourse is co-constructed by interlocutors in a conversation, and there are more opportunities to negotiate meaning, if the information is not shared or given between the interlocutors (Bloor & Bloor, 1992), meaning is not co-created in essays. Co-construction thus requires various grammatical strategies to effectively exploit the Theme position of a sentence and create coherent texts (Eggins, 2004; Schleppegrell, 2004).

Existing literature demonstrates that English learners display highly different performances in thematic choices from native speakers of English. Learner English is found to be less dense in information than native speaker English as English learners overuse textual Themes (Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo, 1998; Boström Aronsson, 2005; Ebrahimi & Khedri, 2013; Hu, 2008; Jalilifar, 2010; Leedham, 2014; Rørvik & Egan, 2013; Wei, 2013a, 2013b), interpersonal Themes (Green, Christopher, & Mei, 2000; Herriman & Boström Aronsson, 2009; Lu, 2013; Wei, 2013a, 2013b), and marked Themes (Green et al., 2000; Herriman & Boström Aronsson, 2009; Lu, 2013; Wei, 2013a, 2013b).

English learners' overuse of textual Themes is mainly reflected by the tendency to place logical connectors, such as *besides*, *furthermore*, and *moreover,* in Theme position (Green et al., 2000, p. 111); the use of coordinating conjunctions signaling apposition or addition (Rørvik & Egan, 2013); and the excessive use of *and*, *but*, and *however* (Hu, 2008; Rørvik & Egan, 2013; Wei, 2014). One reason for this is the overgeneralization of the rules for conjunctions (Hu, 2008; Rørvik & Egan, 2013). For example, the use of conjunctions in connecting clauses is much emphasized in English teaching (Hu, 2008), which leads to English learners' use of conjunctions where the logical relations are already clear (Wei, 2013b). Another reason is their intention to link each clause to the surrounding text and context by using plenty of conjunctions and conjunctive adjuncts as explicit guidance; in doing so, they try to show their ability to take an authoritative stance in their essays (Ghadessy, 1999; McCabe, 1999; Wei, 2014).

Learners' overuse of interpersonal Themes is mainly evidenced by the high frequency of expressions of modality, opinion, or subjective stance markers in Theme position in their English essays, where modal and attitudinal meaning is thematized while topical content is placed in the latter part of a clause. The studies reveal that English learners tend to express modality and evaluation explicitly in their texts, using *of course, probably, maybe, perhaps, certainly, I think,* etc. (Aijmer, 2002; Altenberg & Tapper, 1998; Boström Aronsson, 2005; Granger & Rayson, 2013; Granger & Tyson, 1996; Hasselgård, 2009b; Herriman & Boström Aronsson, 2009; Mellos, 2011; Narita & Sugiura, 2006; Neff et al., 2007), and express their judgment regarding the relevance of the content in the essays (Lu, 2013, p. 55). This gives their essays an overall interactive flavor, in which the writers are very much present, conveying their views to the readers (Hasselgård, 2009b). Another overuse in interpersonal Themes is the excessive use of direct questions (Herriman, 2011), which creates a dialogic method of development similar to that found in conversational language. English learners' involved style is accounted for by L1 transfer at the interface of syntax and information structure (Bohnacker & Rosén, 2008; Cai, 1998; Hasselgård, 2009a, 2009b; Rørvik, 2012); misleading input of English in teaching by highlighting certain formal rules and semantic relationships at the expense of discourse principles (Chen, 2010; Gilquin & Paquot, 2008; Paquot, 2010); and developmental features of novice writers who are yet to acquire the rules of academic writing and knowledge of more formal alternatives to structure their discourse (Gilquin & Paquot, 2008; Paquot, Hasselgård, & Ebeling, 2013; Petch-Tyson, 2013).

Marked Themes in learner English usually take the form of adverbial adjuncts expressing temporal, spatial, and circumstantial elements, or serving as topic-fronting devices (Chen, 2010; Green et al., 2000; Hu, 2008; Lu, 2013; Mellos, 2011; Qian, Andrés Ramírez, & Harman, 2007). English learners tend to place adverbial phrases of time, such as *last year* (Chen, 2010, p. 84), or spatial terms, such as *at the school* (Hu, 2008, p. 115), in Theme position. Inappropriate occupation of Theme position has a deleterious effect on information structure which is believed to have negative effects on both local and global text coherence (Green et al., 2000, p. 102) and the use of circumstantial elements as marked Themes limits English learners' ability to use linear progression as another cohesive strategy (Qian et al., 2007, p. 108).

The deviation of English learners' thematic choices from those made by native speakers gives rise to propositions that English learners should be trained in how to select Themes when writing essays in English. For example, Ventola (1994) advocates that courses for academic essays in a foreign language should develop learners' consciousness and linguistic skills in organizing information in texts in a way which is referentially and thematically cohesive. Alonso and McCabe (2003) point out that English learners' attention should be directed to the progression of information in texts as they often write essays consisting of sentences which do not seem to form part of a cohesive text. Christie and Dreyfus (2007) advocate a genre-based approach to teaching deconstructing genre models for Theme. Bohnacker (2010) points out that "discourse-driven word order patterns are … largely ignored in descriptive grammars, teacher training and language teaching materials" (p. 133) while learners are not likely to monitor for differences concerning the interaction of information structure and word order, as they are probably not even aware that their native language differs from the target language in this regard. Hawes and Thomas (2012) propose that "there is a need for coaching in thematisation … teaching at least rudimentary thematisation