

On the Patterns of Thematic Progression in the Argumentation Writing of Non-English Majors

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The paper aims to testify the effectiveness of the application of “Theme-Based Approach” in improving non-English majors’ writing ability. An experiment has been carried out to test the hypotheses that the application of thematic progression patterns plays a positive role in the improvement in argumentation writing, and there is a correlation between the higher grades and diversified employment of theme types and thematic progression patterns. First of all, a pre-test is conducted in the experimental class and control class. The results of the pretest show that there is no significant difference in the writing between the experimental class and the control class. Then a treatment of the “Theme-based Approach” is performed in the experimental class. Finally, a post-test is carried out in the experimental class and control class to testify the hypothesis. The results of the research indicate that the application of “Theme-based Approach” has positive impact on the improvement of students’ writing ability, and a close relationship between the variety of thematic progression patterns and high grades has been found.

Keywords: theme, thematic progression, Theme-Based Approach

Introduction

In China, according to the Curriculum drawn by China Education Commission in 1997, a piece of good writing means the content is to the point and the discourse is coherent, which has been reflected in the grading criteria of national English proficiency tests, such as CET-4, IELTS, and TOEFL. Too much time and energy have been spent on vocabulary-building. The other requirement of coherent discourse organization has been neglected. Therefore, how to improve writing at discourse level in an efficient and practical way has become a heated research topic in recent years. The thematic theory has been adopted as the theoretical framework for this research.

To begin with, theme functions as the identification of the topic under discussion. Then, the thematic progression patterns serve to organize the discourse structure. To fully apply the thematic theory means to enhance the interrelations between sentences in the whole discourse. The thesis aims to design “Theme-Based Approach”, a writing teaching approach based on the thematic theory to enlighten the English writing teaching in the classroom. Compared with traditional writing-teaching mode, Theme-Based Approach shifts more attention to discourse internal coherence with the assistance of thematic theory.

Research Design

The research in the study is to testify whether the application of Thematic Progression Theory works in improving students' writing skills.

Research Hypothesis

Given the theoretical foundation and research objective, the hypotheses are proposed as follows:

- (1) The application of thematic progression theory may have positive effect on improving students' writing skills.
- (2) There is a close correlation between high-score and more theme types or various thematic progression patterns adopted in the compositions.

Research Subjects

The subjects in the study were students in the author's class. They were all non-English majors in Grade 2. The author chose one as control class (CC), the other as experimental class (EC). CC was made up of 49 students; EC consists of 51 students.

Procedure

There was no grading system in relation to thematic progression, so the compositions in pre-test and post-test were graded under the evaluation standard of CET-4. The evaluation for CET-4 compositions, in which every item suggested the objectivity, was published by National College English Testing Committee.

Pre-test

All the essays from CC and EC would be collected and graded under the grading criteria of CET-4. The scores in the pre-test were viewed as the initial data of writing level.

Treatment

There were a number of authoritative reference books in the treatment of EC, such as *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* by Halliday (1994), articles by ZHU Yong-sheng (1995), HUANG Guo-wen (2009), and ZHANG Yu-hong (2004). The theory of six basic thematic progression patterns with adequate examples had been explained to students in EC.

In the treatment, the instruction and relevant practice in the EC had been designed under the guidance of thematic progression theory, which would be presented in detail in the following part. Meanwhile traditional instructions and exercise for English writing had been presented in the CC, such as underlining the topic sentence, identifying the outline of a sample, writing a complete sentence and then paragraphs (CAI, 1996), teachers correcting the errors, especially the grammar errors at last (DING, 1994).

In the first stage of treatment, having equipped with basic concept of theme and rheme, students in EC got to identify them in sentences, while students in CC practiced writing in traditional routine.

Exercise 1 (theme in sentences). Exercise 1 was the simplest in the whole training, with the aim to recognize the theme and rheme in sentences. Some typical examples were listed as follows:

Simple Theme

- (1) I (T) || had a management position open in my department (R).
- (2) In my department (T) || I had a management position open (R).

Multiple Themes

(3) *Of course he* (T) || *inherited a big fortune* (R).

(4) *So he* (T) || *inherited a big fortune* (R).

Clausal Theme

(5) *Who will get promoted as the vice-Director of the Sales Department* (T) || *is still a mystery* (R).

(6) *I don't want to watch the film* (T) || *because I have never heard of the film star before* (R).

Exercise 2 (theme in texts). Exercise 2 required the students to underline the theme in every sentence in the sample text. It helped students be aware of coherence in sample text and how coherence was realized through the application of thematic progression theory.

As a university student, I'm favor of free admission to the parks. Free entry to parks not only saves people's culture expenditure, but also makes things fairer-people like the poor and students can go to the parks frequently as well. On the other hand, visitors should be informed to preserve the environment while enjoying the beauty of the nature.

T1: As a university student, I

T2: Free entry to parks

T3: On the other hand, visitors

Exercise 3. Exercise 3 was a process of acquiring the knowledge of thematic progression patterns. The research made full use of HUANG Guo-wen's (2009) thematic progression patterns.

Post-test

In the post-test, both the CC and EC were required to write an argumentation within the same time limit on a topic named "City Problems".

Data Collection

Data Collection of Pre-test

In order to ensure the equality of writing ability in the experimental class (EC) and control class (CC), the compositions on the topic of "Shopping Online" from both the EC and CC were collected and compared statistically.

From Tables 1-2, though there is some difference in the average score between EC and CC, the Sig. (2-tailed) was .205 (> 0.05). In view of 95% Confi. Interval of Diff., the lower was -.40610, the upper was 1.86909 and 0 was included. Therefore, it was concluded that there was no significant difference in the writing ability between EC and CC in the pre-test.

In summary, from quantity comparisons in Tables 3-6, it was concluded that although there was minor difference in the average score, score distribution and frequency in choice in theme types and thematic progression patterns, the difference was not significant.

Table 1

Group Statistics of EC and CC in the Pre-test

Group	N	Mean	Std.	Std. error mean
EC	51	8.0784	2.86247	.40083
CC	49	7.3469	2.86902	.40986

Table 2

Independent Sample Test Between EC and CC in the Pre-test

	Levene's test for equality of variances		T-test for equality of means					
	<i>F</i>	Sig.	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	S.E.Diff.	95% Confi. Interval of Diff.
								Lower Upper
Equal variances assumed	.320	.573	1.276	98	.205	.73149	.57325	-.40610 1.86909
Equal variances not assumed			1.276	97.822	.205	.73149	.57328	-.40618 1.86917

Table 3

The Theme Types of EC (48 Compositions)

Choice of theme types	GA (12-15): 8		GB (9-11): 12		GC (5-8): 28	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Simple Theme	47	52.81	72	63.16	173	65.78
Multiple Theme	25	28.09	30	26.32	85	32.32
Clausal Theme	8	8.99	6	5.26	0	0
Theme in Special Structural Patterns	9	10.11	6	5.26	5	1.90
Total sentences	89		114		263	

Note. GA = Group A; GB = Group B; GC = Group C.

Table 4

The Theme Types of CC (46 Compositions)

Choice of theme types	GA (12-15): 8		GB (9-11): 11		GC (5-8): 27	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Simple Theme	46	49.83	73	57.48	142	58.20
Multiple Theme	30	32.31	36	28.35	97	39.75
Clausal Theme	9	9.26	7	5.51	2	0.82
Theme in Special Structural Patterns	8	8.60	11	8.66	3	1.22
Total sentences	93		127		244	

Table 5

The Thematic Progression Patterns of EC (48 Compositions)

Choice of patterns	GA (12-15): 8		GB (9-11): 12		GC (5-8): 28	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Parallel progression	42	47.19	67	58.77	141	53.61
Linear progression	23	25.84	21	18.42	73	27.76
Crossing patterns	0	0	0	0	0	0
Constant progression	0	0	0	0	0	0
Comparison progression	6	6.74	4	3.51	9	3.42
Derivation progression	6	6.74	0	0	0	0
No pattern	12	13.48	22	19.30	40	15.21
Total sentences	89		114		263	

Table 6

The Thematic Progression Patterns of CC (46 Compositions)

Choice of patterns	GA (12-15): 8		GB (9-11): 11		GC (5-8): 27	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Parallel progression	37	39.78	58	45.67	122	50
Linear progression	28	30.11	26	20.47	76	31.15
Crossing patterns	0	0	0	0	0	0
Constant progression	0	0	0	0	0	0
Comparison progression	6	6.45	14	11.02	0	0
Derivation progression	12	12.90	11	8.66	16	6.56
No pattern	10	10.75	18	14.17	30	12.30
Total sentences	93		127		244	

Data Collection of Post-test

For EC, the students had received the treatment based on the Thematic Progression Theory; for the students in CC, they got the traditional writing teaching approach. Then EC and CC were assigned to write a composition on the topic of “City Problems”. The data collection and analysis were done in the absolutely same way as those in the pre-test.

Table 7 was set in accordance with their scores graded by the experienced professors.

From Table 8, the Sig. (2-tailed) was .019 (< 0.05). In view of 95% Confi. Interval of Diff., the lower was .23496, the upper was 2.50454 and 0 is not included. Therefore, it was concluded that there was significant difference in the writing ability between EC and CC in the post-test.

Table 7

Group Statistics of EC and CC in the Post-test

Group	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std.	Std. error mean
EC	51	8.9412	2.88036	.40333
CC	49	7.5714	2.83578	.40511

Table 8

Independent Sample Test Between EC and CC in the Post-test

	Levene's test for equality of variances				T-test for equality of means				
	<i>F</i>	Sig.	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	S.E.Diff.	95% Confi. Interval of Diff.	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.193	.661	2.395	98	.019	1.36975	.57184	.23496	2.50454
Equal variances not assumed			2.396	97.940	.018	1.36975	.57166	.23530	2.50419

From Tables 9-10, the distribution varied in the EC and CC, especially, in GA and GB. When it came to the comparison dealing with only GA and GB, the percentage of clausal theme and theme in special structural patterns rose in EC. So, the gap between the first two types (simple and multiple) and latter two (clausal and in special structural patterns) decreased. In GC, which was the relatively poor, the distribution differed little between the EC and CC. The treatment based on the Thematic Theory functions well in the relatively advanced writing.

Table 9

The Theme Types of EC (47 Compositions)

Choice of theme types	GA (12-15): 11		GB (9-11): 15		GC (5-8): 21	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Simple Theme	44	36.36	53	39.55	126	60.87
Multiple Theme	34	28.10	46	34.33	59	28.50
Clausal Theme	26	21.49	23	17.16	11	5.31
Theme in Special Structural Patterns	17	14.05	12	8.96	11	5.31
Total sentences	121		134		207	

Table 10

The Theme Types of CC (46 Compositions)

Choice of theme types	GA (12-15): 9		GB (9-11): 13		GC (5-8): 24	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Simple Theme	51	50.50	71	52.99	128	55.90
Multiple Theme	29	28.71	43	32.09	86	37.55
Clausal Theme	12	11.88	5	3.73	5	2.18
Theme in Special Structural Patterns	9	8.91	15	11.19	10	4.37
Total sentences	101		134		229	

From Figure 1, there was a tendency that the higher the scores were, the more patterns the compositions applied. It could be inferred from the data that lack of the changes in thematic progression patterns led to a boring and plain composition.

Based on Tables 11-12, it was summarized that having received the instruction and exercises designed with the theoretical foundation of thematic progression, the students in EC (especially the GA and GB) achieved greater progress than those in CC who were under the traditional writing teaching approach. Moreover, there were flexible changes and diversities in the adoption of theme types and thematic progression patterns. Finally, through the individual comparison within GA, GB, and GC, it was obvious that the advanced writing and various choices in theme types and thematic progression patterns were correlated.

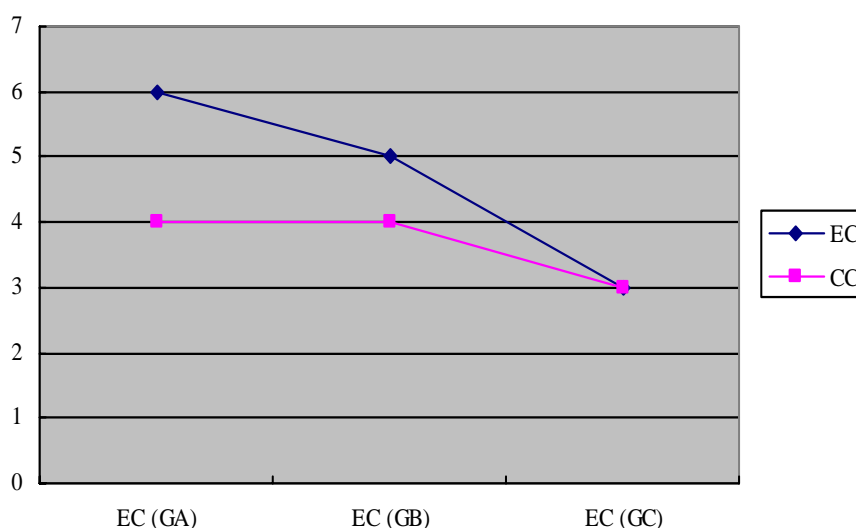


Figure 1. The correlation between the choices in thematic progression patterns and the scores of compositions.

Table 11

The Thematic Progression Patterns of EC (47 Compositions)

Choice of patterns	GA (12-15): 11		GB (9-11): 15		GC (5-8): 21	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Parallel progression	31	25.62	57	42.54	105	50.72
Linear progression	42	34.71	38	28.36	68	32.85
Crossing patterns	10	8.26	4	2.99	0	0
Constant progression	8	6.61	0	0	0	0
Comparison progression	12	9.92	14	10.45	13	6.28
Derivation progression	8	6.61	11	8.21	0	0
No pattern	10	8.26	10	7.46	21	10.14
Total sentences	121		134		207	

Table 12

The Thematic Progression Patterns of CC (46 Compositions)

Choice of patterns	GA (12-15): 9		GB (9-11): 13		GC (5-8): 24	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Parallel progression	37	36.63	48	35.82	107	46.72
Linear progression	38	37.62	36	26.87	76	33.19
Crossing patterns	0	0	0	0	0	0
Constant progression	0	0	0	0	0	0
Comparison progression	10	9.90	20	14.93	0	0
Derivation progression	10	9.90	15	11.19	26	11.35
No pattern	6	5.94	15	11.19	20	8.73
Total sentences	101		134		229	

Conclusion

To give answers to the above two research questions, comparative research and analysis are applied to the subjects in the experiment. The followings are the main research findings:

Firstly, the introduction and acquisition of thematic progression have a positive effect on the improvement.

Secondly, there is a positive correlation between various employment of theme types, thematic progression patterns as well and the high-score compositions of English writing.

The results of the experiment imply that application of thematic progression benefits learners in improving the writing. Moreover, it offers a large amount of implication to inspire the instructors devoted to the language teaching. That is the reasons why the training model based on the Thematic Progression Theory is highly encouraged.

(1) It offers new applied information to the reform of teaching models. With the help of thematic progression, how to make students aware of the interrelation of functional sentences becomes possible and feasible. Thematic progression provides a tool for readers to check if the discourse develops in a reasonable way for readers to follow. It provides a new training method for learners to improve English writing.

(2) Both the theme and thematic progression give directions to appropriate and efficient communication, that is to say, in linear manners. In other words, the close interconnection of the preceding sentence and following sentence confirms the logic relevance in a discourse, in a passage and in a composition as a whole.

(3) It gives a clue to wise choice and organization of information. A pair of concept named Theme and Rheme will be discussed on focus in the Theme-Based Approach. A wise choice and organization of information makes the text easy to follow.

(4) It provides enlightenment to the design of writing exercise. Suppose several chapters in reference books are spared to discuss the application of thematic progression, learners will learn how to make a beginning, develop the sentences and summarize the whole writing in the end instead of mixing up all the ideas into a whole.

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