Thematic Operational Approach
and the Writing Teaching of College English

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Abstract

Thematic structure, an important factor for textual metafunction, plays a significant role in inspecting and promoting the textual coherence. With a theoretical statement of Thematic theory and TP patterns, this paper proposes the feasibility of the Thematic Operational Approach in the teaching of college English writing. This approach is proved to not only strengthen students' application awareness of TP patterns, but also promote the coherence of the whole text. It might be a good trial in college English writing teaching.

Keywords: Coherence, Thematic Operational Approach, Thematic progression patterns, Teaching of college English writing

1. Introduction

Writing itself is the process of making a coherent passage. It is the most effective way to show one's English proficiency. In recent years, great achievements have been made in both the theoretical research and the practice of college English writing teaching and learning. However, many of the students' writings are still far from satisfactory.

In the authors' view, college students' discourse inability is the root cause. Many students do not know how to make a coherent discourse. Consequently, they cannot present their statements or argumentation closely around the topics of the passages in a coherent way. In fact, the thematic organization of the text is closely connected with discourse coherence or text connexity. Different Thematic Progression (TP) patterns accelerate the coherence with different effects. Whereas researches on this aspect are few, the present study on the application of various TP patterns is of practical significance. In most of the texts, the thematic progressions are the integration of various TP patterns, and suitable TP patterns should be chosen and applied accordingly and appropriately in the light of grammar structure, cohesive devices, rhetoric and even genres to improve the discourse coherence.

The authors explore, as a trial, the feasibility of Thematic Operational Approach in the writing teaching of college English. This approach, based on the empirical teaching by the authors, is also the creative point of this paper.

2. Theme, Rheme and Thematic Progression

In the framework of Functional Grammar by Halliday (1976), the textual function refers to the integrity, identity and coherence of a text. Thematic structure, an important factor to achieve textual metafunction, plays a significant role in examining whether and how a sequence of sentences or paragraphs constitutes a coherent text.

2.1 Theme and Rheme

Halliday (1976) defines "Theme is the element which serves as the starting point of the message; it is that with which the clause is concerned. The remainder of the message, in which Theme is developed, is called in Prague School terminology Rheme." In that sense, theme is the first part of a sentence. It is the framework of the starting message, which tells the topic of the sentence. All the following parts are called rheme. It, as the core of the sentence, is the narration, description and explanation of the topic.

Themes can be classified into three groups by Halliday according to the complexity: simple theme, multiple theme and

clause as theme.

2.1.1 Simple Theme

Simple theme is an independent unity which cannot be split.

E.g. 1) An operating system runs a computer.   2) On the wall there was a picture.

   3) What has he written down?   4) Leave the lamp here.

As illustrated, nominal groups, adverbial phrases, interrogative pronouns and verbs can be used as simple themes in different sentences. Halliday usually calles such themes as "Topical Themes".

2.1.2 Multiple Theme

Generally speaking, simple theme only includes topical theme which relates to the experiential function, while in addition to the topical theme, some sentences also have a textual or interpersonal theme.

E.g. 5) And so the angry headmaster left the classroom at once.

   6) Probably the newly set up team will win their first game.

In 5), "and so" is the textual theme, and "the angry headmaster" is the topical theme; in 6), "probably" is the interpersonal theme, and "the newly set up team" is the topical theme. The theme of each sentence is the combination of topical theme with textual or interpersonal theme.

2.1.3 Clause as Theme (Thematic Equative)

If theme is a clause (namely the clause or the non-finite verbs, such as –ed or –ing phrases), it is called clause as theme.

E.g. 7) What the duke gave to my aunt was that teapot.

   8) The way Dinah washed her children's face was this.

Halliday (1970) refers to theme as a line of nails on the wall. The contents of the texts are carried along the nail line. He suggests that theme is "what the clause is about", and no matter what the author wants to talk about, he must arrange the relative information around this topic in a logic order, with the thematic structure arranged distinguishingly according to the specific genres and aims. In a word, thematic structure is one of the necessary conditions for creating discourse coherence.

Themes and rhemes make up its own thematic structure of each sentence. While sentences being integrated into a context, the thematic structure of each sentence is closely related to those of the previous and latter sentences. In this way, the coherence of a discourse is ensured.

2.2 Thematic Progression

F. Danes (1974) determines the term thematic progression as "the choice and ordering of utterances, themes, their mutual concatenation and hierarchy, as well as their relation to their hyper-themes of the superior text units (such as paragraph, chapter, etc.), to the whole text, and to the situation. Thematic progression might be viewed as the skeleton of the plot." Three main Thematic Progressions (Chained TP, Continuous TP and Derived Hyperthematic TP) are shown in the following diagrams (Diagrams 1, 2, 3) to indicate how themes are derived from rhemes, or how themes are repeated with new rhemes, as well as how themes are derived from the general idea.

Insert Diagram 1 Here

E.g. 1): Nevertheless, there are still a number of film-fans (R1) nowadays. They (T2=R1) claim that as classical art, film is far more enjoy able than TV (R2).

Continuous TP pattern is one of the basic forms of English paragraph organization. Paragraph with such TP pattern often describes a central idea, because the themes in the text constitute a chain of co-referential items. The whole paragraph is coherent and focuses on a key point as themes are clearly related. Rhemes describe different aspects of the same event or the same thing from different angles.

Insert Diagram 2 Here

E.g. 2): "We (T1) shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we (T2) shall fight them on the beaches, we (T3) shall fight them on the landing grounds, we (T4) shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we (T5) shall fight in the hills; we (T6) shall never surrender." (Churchill 1940)

In Derived Hyperthematic TP, the themes of the various constituent clauses are all derived from that general idea, but are not identical to one another (see Diagram 3).

Insert Diagram 3 Here

E.g. 3): Color (T) in our daily life is meaningful. Red (T1) represents enthusiasm and ardor. Green (T2) symbolizes

hope and vitality. White (T3) is a mark of chasteness….

As the thematic structure and TP patterns play a significant role in promoting the coherence of the passages, empirical teaching is employed for the study. And Thematic Operational Approach based on the thematic theory and TP patterns has been proposed to not only strengthen students' awareness of applying some TP patterns, but also promote the coherence of the whole passage.

3. Writing Problems and the Operation of Thematic Operational Approach

3.1 Writing Problems

According to the data via the questionnaire and interview, most of the students have improved their communicative abilities and they have great expectation to construct good compositions. Pitifully, their writings are still loose in structure and disordered in logic; the whole texts lack unity. One of the major obstacles for the students in writing lies in the logical organization of the text content and the coherent layout of the textual structure.

In addition, the data about teachers' assessment on the compositions (see Table 1) reveals that teachers' excessive focuses on grammatical mistakes mislead students to think that correct grammar is the primary factor in writing, which, in turn, leads to the result that students pay too much attention to grammar instead of the rationality of organization and fail to make a coherent writing.

As for writing guidance, Product Approach, Process Approach and Length Approach are three prevailing approaches in college English writing teaching. Each approach has its own emphases and different effects on assisting students to write. However, these approaches do not contribute sufficiently to the unity and coherence of the whole passage.

Each individual sentence, grammatical correct as it is, is not equal to a coherent discourse. Thematic Operational Approach is testified effective in facilitating students to stick to the topic and form the coherent passages.

3.2 The Operation of Thematic Operational Approach

In view of the writing problems, Thematic Operational Approach aims to emphasize the connecting modes and regulars among sentences with the starting point of the whole passage structure. With the appropriate build-up of the thematic structure and TP patterns, students are guided to stick to the central point and express their ideas coherently at discourse level.

This approach can be conducted with three steps: brief introduction of theoretical knowledge, analysis of sample compositions and relevant exercises.

Step 1. Brief Introduction of Theoretical Knowledge

3.2.1 Theory about thematic structure and TP patterns

Thematic theory is the kernel of this new writing approach. Before thematic theory is introduced, some terms belonging to the sentence elements are reviewed again for comparison, such as the subject, predicate and object of a sentence. And special attention is paid to the subjects of a sentence. Usually nouns, noun phrases and gerund phrases can be taken as the subject of a sentence. For example, both in 1) "*I went my way from house to house*" and in 2) "*From house to house, I went my way.*", "*I*" is the grammatical subject of the sentences.

Then, the terms "Theme" and "Rheme" are elicited on the basis of comparing them with the grammatical subject of a sentence. As Halliday says, "Theme" is the first constituent and "Rheme" the remaining parts, so that in 1), grammatical subject *I* is also the theme of the sentence and the remaining part is the rheme; whereas in 2), the adverbial phase *from house to house* is the theme of the sentence, and "*I went my way*" is the rheme.

After a general description about "Theme" and "Rheme", a detailed classification is introduced as   presented in 2.1. It will help students understand better what "Theme" and "Rheme" are and how to classify themes in different sentence patterns. Three basic categories of TP patterns discussed in 2.2 are also introduced. When instructing this theoretical knowledge, teachers should follow two principles as follows:

(1) No excessive theoretical knowledge. The focus should only be Halliday's Functional Grammar. The aim of introducing thematic theory is to help students with a better understanding of writing skills rather than a specific theory learning. Otherwise, it diverts from the teaching aims.

(2) Not too much classification of themes and TP patterns. The focus should only be the three kinds of theme (simple theme, multiple theme and thematic equative) and TP patterns (simple linear progression, constant theme progression and thematic progression with derived themes) respectively.

3.2.2 Theory about cohesion and coherence

Cohesion and coherence are very complex and integrated with each other. Illustrations are limited only in terms of some knowledge about grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. But considering students' existing problems and knowledge construct, it should be pointed out that those simple connectors frequently used in their compositions are

overt and lexical conjunctive adjunct in form, which itself can not ensure the whole coherence of texts. To improve the coherence of the whole passages, it also depends on the combination of overt and lexical cohesion and the covert cohesion in meaning (thematic structure).

The aim of this first step is to help students with a general knowledge and awareness of thematic structure and TP patterns. Since college writing teaching is closely related with CET 4 writing, and since most of CET 4 writings are argumentations, the samples in the empirical teaching are mainly argumentative writings. An argumentation uses language to justify or refute a standpoint, with the aim of securing agreement in views. It is obvious that good logic is even more important for argumentative discourse than any other types of discourse. Without coherent and logical progression in structure, the passage will be rather disordered and inconvincible. It is proved that proper application of thematic structure and TP patterns can facilitate students with a better structural coherence in their CET 4 argumentations.

Step 2. Analysis of Thematic Structure and TP Patterns in Sample Compositions

The second step is sample analysis to illustrate how thematic structure and TP patterns work in constructing compositions. A well-chosen argumentation is handed out to students. The students are asked to do the following tasks: 1) To find out all the themes and rhemes in each clause and classify them into the corresponding categories; 2) To find out all the TP patterns used in the passages and classify them; 3) To give comments on the coherence on basis of the analysis.

A particular example is presented to show how the tasks are conducted. The passage "*Practice Makes Perfect*" is the virtue writing task of CET 4 in Jan. 1997. This sample is analyzed in the article *Theme-Rheme Theory and the Textual Coherence of College English Writing* written by Chen Mei in 2005. All themes and rhemes in the writing have already been underlined by Miss Chen. The whole passage is shown totally as follows:

As the saying goes (T1), practice makes perfect (R1). Whatever you do (T2), you are certain to aim at perfection (R2). But perfection (T3) lies in practice (R3). Without practice (T4), you can never expect to be really good at anything (R4). On the contrary, the more you practice (T5), the more likely you are to have things perfectly done (R5).

A case in point (T6) is the study of English (R6). If you are to improve your pronunciation (T7), you must practice every sound again and again (R7). If you want to write an excellent composition (T8), you have to practice your writing (R8).

Another example (T9) is Deng Yaping, the world No.1 woman ping-pong player (R9). This short girl (T10), who does not seem to be cut for sports, owes her success to painstaking and prolonged practice (R10). Practice (T11), so to speak, can even make a difference between becoming merely good at something and becoming a champion (R11).

One thing needs to point out that students are asked to do the three tasks as mentioned above before the sample underlined by Chen Mei is shown. For the identification of each theme and rheme, students can do almost as well as the above underlined sample.

The progression of the TP patterns can be indicated as follows: R1=R2=T3, R3=T4=T5, R7=R8, R9=T10, R10=T11

Attention should be paid to how these patterns contribute to the coherence of the passage. It is also found that the most frequently used pattern is simple linear progression (used for 4 times in total). They are R2=T3, R3=T4, R9=T10 and R10=T11. By analysing the progression of TP patterns in the sample, the teacher should explain explicitly the relationship between themes and rhemes. New information in the previous rhemes is usually expressed by the themes of the latter sentences in chain.

With this empirical teaching, students come to realize the significance of theoretical instruction and have a better understanding of the thematic structure. They not only know how to use the acquired thematic progression consciously and properly in their writing, but are even able to notice new TP patterns (as shown in R1=R2, R7=R8 for example) themselves. They are satisfied with their progress in their writing.

Step 3. Relevant Exercises for Reinforcement

In order to consolidate students' awareness and sensitivity of/to thematic structure and TP patterns, various exercises are provided for reinforcement. (1) To correct the unsuitable themes in the given passages and tell how these errors obstruct the structural coherence of the whole passage. (2) Blank-filling with appropriate connectors and modal adjuncts. But it should be pointed out that in this section several answers may be acceptable, as different students have their own viewpoints about the passage. Comparison is necessary to see which is more suitable. (3) Composition writing in class. Students' compositions are collected and compared with their previous writings.

According to the author's experiment, the proportions of TP patterns used in the pretest samples and posttest samples are listed in the following Table 1.

Insert Table 1 Here

This table shows that the students have made apparent progress in using TP patterns. Through the instruction of thematic operational approach, students' awareness of employing relative theories in their writing is also significantly enhanced. Their writings are much more coherent with the application of various TP patterns. They can express their statements with logic clear and central ideas enlightened.

4. Conclusion

Thematic structure and TP patterns play a significant role in constructing a passage. They are the skeleton of the plot. (Danes, 1994) Choosing words is one thing, while arraying words is quite another. In written discourses, the appropriate build-up of the thematic structure and TP patterns help students express their ideas logically and coherently. Thematic Operational Approach emphasizes the connection of sentences, clutching to the central idea of the writing.

As indicated by the experimental teaching, Thematic Operational Approach, based on Thematic structure and TP patterns, contributes to the close connection between lexical cohesion and covert cohesion in meaning, and the highlight of the central ideas of the text. This approach will not only strengthens students' application awareness of TP patterns, but also promotes the coherence of the whole text. It might be a good trial in college English writing teaching.

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Table 1. Data of TP pattern proportions

|	Proportions of TP patterns (%)
Before experiment	25.46
After experiment	50.09

T1-----R1
↓
T2 (=R1)-----R2
↓
Tn (Rn-1)-----Rn
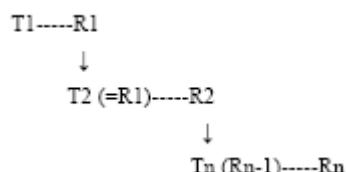
Diagram 1. Chained TP usually arranged consciously in a Z-form

T1-----R1
↓
T2 (=T1)-----R2
↓
Tn (=T1)-----Rn
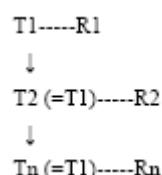
Diagram 2. Continuous TP
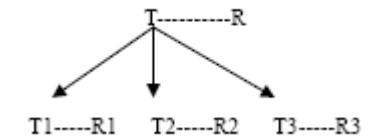
Diagram 3. Derived Hyperthematic TP