Improving Text Flow in ESL Learner Compositions

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In the ESL writing classroom, we find that learners often write essays that consist of sentences which do not seem to connect together into a cohesive text. While ELT writing materials provide some focus on cohesive devices, little attention is paid to the progression of information in texts. In this article, we provide a way to focus on the progression of information through *thematic patterning* (Danes, 1974) in the writing classroom. We apply this as a tool to help in the rewriting of a student text, and suggest how it might be of practical use in the ESL classroom.

Introduction

In our professional experience, we have come across many teachers preparing students for academic writing in English who develop their tasks for the classroom in different university contexts, but somehow we all seem to face similar problems. It is indeed often the case that when we read and assess student compositions, we perceive little or no flow to their texts, that is, sentences are not well connected. We can see this in the following extract of a ESL student essay written in response to the *Test of Written English* prompt:

What are the qualities of a good parent?

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Everyone has got lot of problems with his parents. Every generation keeps with the
tradition of yelling at home. This is something that doesn't change even if we are jealous
when it seems like other people have the relationship with his parents that we always
wanted.

First of all something we like from anyone, and specially from a person who is close to
you is to feel that person cares about you, about your interests. Parents tend to simply
ask their children about their lives because they think, they have to, not because they
are really interested.

Another thing that a parent should take care along the life with his child is to create a
relationship with them. It is so usual to feel that your relationship ended with your
parents some time ago and now you just live together and still depend economically from
them. That just make you feel that you are a bit alone and you need that person at your
side. When you still growing up and need some independence, some freedom, parents should
understand and be comprehensive of your needs, knowing when your freedom starts and being
sure of the education they gave you.
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As we can see, this writer lacks an awareness of how information should flow through text, as he moves from one idea to another using vague references, such as pronominal "this", "something we like from anyone" "another thing", and he includes information late in his sentences which he would do well to include earlier in the same sentence, such as "parents should understand and be comprehensive of your needs". These problems of cohesion and how they might be remedied will become more apparent throughout this article.

Cohesion and English Language Teaching

Traditionally, cohesion has often been neglected in language teaching, where sentences have been created, manipulated and assessed

in isolation. Only from the mid 1970s onwards, in particular with the publication of Halliday and Hasan's *Cohesion in English* (1976), did it become progressively assumed in L2 writing teaching that a coherent text is more that a series of grammatical sentences lined up one after another; rather, they interlace, each sentence building on the preceding ones while at the same time advancing the discourse. Nowadays, all general ESL course books and most reading and writing courses incorporate work designed to help learners grasp the cohesive devices of written English: discourse connectors, ellipsis, conjunctions, and so forth. However, L2 writing instructors still come across ESL student compositions in which sentences, assessed in isolation, are grammatically correct and yet the overall effect is one of incoherence.

Information Progression through Thematic Patterning

In this article, we explore the progression of information in English texts and show how it can be exploited to provide for greater cohesion in our students' compositions. We feel that this can be very helpful as a tool of instruction at the level of discourse for the writing teacher. In the rest of this article, we explain how information progression is achieved through thematic patterning, and then demonstrate how it can be used to help improve the composition above.

Indeed, one way of achieving cohesion in text is through *thematic patterning*, which involves the relationships between clauses based on the information contained in their themes and rhemes. According to M.A.K. Halliday (1967a and b; 1968; 1976; 1994), **theme** is a structural category realized by the first constituent of the clause in English (not taking into account any initial discourse marker, such as *however* or *probably*); the remainder of the message, the part in which the theme is developed, is called **rheme**.

Some Examples

In text, the usual, unmarked pattern of information flow is for the theme to coincide with *given* information, and rheme to provide *new* information. Given information is that which the speaker/writer assumes is present in the reader/hearer's conscious framework (Prince, 1981). Information which is familiar or known is merely taken by the readers as a key upon the basis of which the following information is to be processed. New information, on the other hand, is that which has not been previously mentioned in the discourse, or is unpredictable by the reader/hearer (Prince, 1981). Discourse producers, being aware of this fact, try to place more relevant information (relevant to their intended topic or meaning) at more noticeable positions in the hierarchical organization of a text or sentence in order to boost the addressee's ability to take up the message as intended. In English, given information is usually placed at the beginning of the sentences (coinciding with the theme), whereas new information is usually located at the end (in the rheme), as in the following example:

```
Q. Where is Mary?          A. Mary's      at the movies
                              GIVEN        NEW
                              THEME        RHEME
```

Thematic patterning involves connecting sentences together in a way which moves the reader from the Given to the New. There are several main types of thematic patterning according to the different sequences of thematic and rhematic choices made throughout the text (Danes, 1974). In the first one, the *constant* pattern, the same topical theme is chosen over several clauses or sentences. We can see this in the following example:

```
Urea is a very important chemical because of its industrial uses and its role on
biological processes.  It is excreted in the urine as the chief nitrogen-containing end
product of protein metabolism. It is produced on a large scale and used as a fertilizer
and raw material in the manufacture of urea-formaldehyde plastics and of drugs. It is
usually prepared in laboratories from the reaction between potassium cyanate and ammonium
chloride, which is basically a repetition of the Wohler procedure.

Urea => it => it => it
```

In this lab report, a student is describing *urea*, and thus repeats this theme in all of the sentences, forming a constant theme chain.

Another possibility is to pick something from the rest of the sentence, i.e. from the rheme, as the theme of a subsequent sentence. This is illustrated by the following text. (Themes are in italics, and referents which subsequently become themes are underlined):

The early feminist movement was greatly influenced by works like "On the Vindication of the Rights of Women" (1972) by <u>Mary Wollstonecraft</u>. *She* proposed <u>a feminist agenda whose</u> <u>aims were to expose the exclusion of women from traditionally "male" spheres like</u> <u>politics, economics, education and religion, to take apart these structures, which denied</u> <u>women their deserved rights and attempt to achieve these rights for them in the male</u> <u>dominated spheres.</u> *These aims* became a main focus for religious women in particular, at the time, in the United States.

The early feminist movement => <u>Mary Wollstonecraft</u>
=>
she => <u>a feminist agenda whose aims...</u>
=>
These aims

In this text about feminism, the student moves move *the early feminist movement* to *Mary Wollstonecraft* , and the latter then becomes the theme of the next sentence as *she* . Then the writer introduces *the aims of the feminist agenda*, lists those, and then goes on to make *These aims* the theme of the third sentence, and to develop a point about where these aims were important.

Thus, the constant pattern provides more of a static text, which works well with description, classification and often with narration. The linear pattern provides more of a dynamic text, which works well with explanation, as it allows writers to add to points by always moving from a given idea to a new one. Obviously, texts will combine patterns, depending on the intention of the writer.

Thematic patterning has been the subject of a great deal of research on different text types; this research shows typical thematic patternings of texts (including   work by Danes, 1974 and Fries, 1983), as well as to the usefulness of this patterning for writing students to analyze their own texts to check for thematic flow (cf. Alonso Belmonte & McCabe, 1998a and b; Bloor & Bloor, 1992; Nwogu, 1995; Schleppegrell, 2000; Vande Kopple, 1991; Weissberg, 1984; Witte, 1983). However, Thematic patterning is virtually ignored in ESL text books, where there is little reference to text flow. [1]

How Thematic Patterning Might Be Applied

In order to show how thematic patterning might be applied in order for teachers to suggest to students how they might improve their writing exercises, we return to the student text included earlier in this article. We suggest certain changes in the text based on the above principles. We are aware that there are other discourse problems in the text (e.g. the use of colloquial "you"); however, here we focus on text flow through thematic patterning . The rewritten text appears below, followed by a commentary on the changes, which are numbered in the order they are discussed.

```
All young people have a lot of problems with their parents. These generational conflicts
(1) keep up the tradition of yelling in every home. This tradition(2) is something that
doesn't change even if we are jealous when it seems like other people have the
relationship with his parents that we always wanted.

One thing we want in a relationship with our parents(3) is to feel that they care about
us, about our interests. Parents tend to simply ask their children about their lives
because they think they have to, not because they are really interested. So parents(4)
should be really interested in their children.

Along with this interest(5), a parent should take care along the life with his child to
create a relationship with them. It is so usual to feel that your relationship ended with
your parents some time ago and now you just live together and still depend economically
from them. That just make you feel that you are a bit alone and you need your parents at
your side. So parents(6) should understand and be comprehensive of your needs when you are
still growing up and need some independence, knowing when your freedom starts and being
sure of the education they gave you.
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1. "These generational conflicts" encapsulates problems with parents, and provides a connection with the rheme of the first sentence.
2. "This tradition" specifies the relationship with the rheme of the previous sentence, better than simply "this", as the writer used in the original.

3. Eliminating "first of all" and changing "something we like from anyone" to "one thing we want in a relationship with our parents" further specifies the idea and also connects back to the rheme of the previous sentence.
4. Repeating the information provided in the theme of the previous sentence, we have added a sentence to reiterate the point of the paragraph.
5. "Another thing" is replaced by "along with this interest", which provides a connection to the rheme of the previous sentence.
6. We have switched the order of the clauses, as the independent clause "parents...needs" connects directly with the rheme of the previous sentence, so we have placed it in initial position.

Conclusion

We have attempted to better the information flow of the extract without losing sight of the student's original intentions. This short extract is a very small sample of what can be done when applying thematic patterning to longer texts, and illustrates its usefulness as a discourse tool for aiding students in rewriting their essays. We also believe that thematic patterning can provide the basis for activities to help students produce naturally flowing texts.

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Footnote

[1] This is not entirely the case, as there is work on information structure in Willis' *Students' Grammar* (1991), published in the Cobuild Series, and in *New Headway-Upper Intermediate* (1998). The latter presents some emphatic word arrangements in English in units entitled "Changing the Focus of a Sentence" and "Adding Emphasis" respectively, and provides exercises in manipulating word order of sentences to allow for different Given and New information patterns.

http://iteslj.org/Articles/Alonso-ImprovingFlow.html