

A Study on the Effectiveness of the Thematic Progression Theory in Enhancing Writing Skills Among English Majors in Private Institutions

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ABSTRACT

For English majors in higher education, writing demands not only grammatical accuracy and appropriate word choice at the linguistic level, but also logical coherence at the discourse level. Compared to non-English majors, university English students possess a more solid foundation in grammar and vocabulary, yet they often struggle to achieve high scores in writing. This is because discourse cohesion and coherence are also key criteria in English writing assessment. The Thematic Progression within functional grammar emphasizes logical connections and semantic relationships within discourse context. This theory can help students enhance their discourse organization skills, thereby improving their writing proficiency. Guided by the Thematic Progression, this study uses English majors at Qingdao City University as experimental subjects. Through discourse analysis of students' essays before and after the experiment, it explores the importance of the Thematic Progression theory in writing.

KEYWORDS

Thematic progression; English Major; Writing

1 Introduction

English writing proficiency serves as a core indicator for assessing foreign language majors' comprehensive language application and logical thinking skills. However, in English programs at private applied universities, writing instruction often faces significant challenges. Due to factors such as insufficient motivation, lack of interest, and weak foundational knowledge, students' English compositions commonly exhibit problems like limited content development, loose structure, and poor logical coherence. The root cause often lies not in insufficient syntactic or lexical accuracy, but in a lack of systematic understanding and application of discourse organization principles. Traditional English writing instruction primarily focuses on correcting linguistic errors, imitating sentence structures, and memorizing model essay templates. It neglects training in macro-level discourse organization and internal coherence, leaving students unable to produce logically rigorous, structurally coherent, and cohesive texts.

Thematic Progression, as a key theory in systemic functional linguistics for analyzing discourse information structure, provides a robust analytical framework for understanding and constructing coherent discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). By examining the dynamic configuration and progression patterns of theme (the starting point of discourse) and rheme (the core content of discourse) within discourse, this theory reveals how meaning flows orderly from known information to new information, thereby achieving discourse cohesion and integrity (Danes, 1974). In recent years, domestic scholars have begun to explore the theoretical framework's potential applications in foreign language teaching (e.g., Wang & Zhang, 2017). However, systematic empirical studies examining its implementation among English majors at private institutions remain relatively scarce.

2 Current State of Research at Home and Abroad

The Prague School Czech linguist, Mathesius, proposed the Thematic Progression Theory based on the communicative function of sentences. It encompasses three key concepts: theme (T), rheme (R), and thematic progression. The theme is the starting point of a sentence, typically representing known information and serving as the subject of discussion. The rheme constitutes the narrative content surrounding the theme, usually presenting new information. When multiple sentences are combined into a discourse, regular connections and progression emerge between the themes and rhemes of preceding and following sentences. This dynamic process is termed "thematic progression." It determines how discourse information unfolds and serves as one of the key mechanisms for achieving semantic coherence.

The Systemic Functional Linguistics school, represented by Halliday, absorbed and developed theme theory. In his 1994 publication *Introduction to Functional Grammar*, he regarded theme structure as a crucial component of discourse function, thereby interpreting and applying this theory within a broader linguistic framework. Halliday distinguishes between Simple Themes and Multiple Themes. The former constitutes a semantically indivisible unit, while the latter can be subdivided based on internal structural characteristics into Textual Themes, Interpersonal Themes, and Topical or Experiential Themes. Halliday posits that when all three themes co-occur within a single theme, the typical sequence is Textual Theme-Interpersonal Theme-Topical Theme. While theme and rheme remain fixed in isolated sentences, within

discourse, as topics evolve, a rheme that served as unknown information in the preceding sentence may become known information as a theme in the subsequent sentence. Danes (1969) termed this pattern---where the theme-rheme, rheme-rheme, and theme-rheme relationships continuously shift between sentences, creating tightly interconnected contextual links---the thematic progression model. Thus, studying thematic progression is essentially examining discourse coherence and cohesion, revealing the relationships between sentences and paragraphs.

Numerous linguists both domestically and internationally have proposed their own perspectives and theoretical foundations regarding the classification of subject-moved patterns. Danes initially identified three types: the simple linear subject-moved pattern, the cohesive subject-moved pattern, and the derivational subject-moved pattern. Hu Zhuanglin (1995) introduced the T1-T2 type, R1-T2 type, and T1+R1-T2 type. Huang Guowen (1997) categorized subject-position advancement patterns into parallel, continuous, and concentrated types. Xu Shenghuan (1982) added the intersecting type. Huang Yan proposed six patterns in 1988, including parallel, continuous, and concentrated types. In 1995, Zhu Yongsheng developed four common theme-rheme patterns based on Dennis's theory: parallel, concentrated, continuous, and cross. While these patterns defined by linguists share similar content and theoretical foundations, they differ primarily in nomenclature.

3 Analysis of Writing Skills Among English Majors in Private Universities

The average college entrance exam scores of English majors at most private institutions exceed provincial undergraduate cutoff lines, indicating generally strong foundational English skills, though individual variations persist. Big data reveals that 60% of students choose English majors due to strong English proficiency, demonstrating high academic engagement and strong self-directed learning abilities, yet lacking intrinsic motivation. Nevertheless, 20% of students, despite choosing English majors, still lack a comprehensive understanding of English's role in personal growth and national/societal development. Another 20% select English majors solely because of its unique absence of science courses, exhibiting weak learning motivation. According to the Chinese English Proficiency Scale, most students' English language proficiency reaches CET-4 level, with writing skills equivalent to CET-3 level. Their writing learning exhibits distinct characteristics and urgent challenges requiring breakthroughs.

At the linguistic knowledge level, students typically possess a foundational to intermediate vocabulary and grammatical framework, enabling them to produce fundamentally correct sentences. However, their language usage often exhibits a tendency toward "rigidity," relying habitually on a limited and safe repertoire of sentence patterns and vocabulary. This results in expressions lacking diversity and flexibility.

At the discourse competence level, the core issue lies in the weakness or even absence of "discourse awareness." Students generally perceive writing as "stringing together correct sentences" rather than "organically constructing meaning." This manifests specifically as: (1) Poor intra-paragraph coherence. Loose sentence-to-sentence relationships, often relying on simple logical connectors like "and, but, so," lacking implicit cohesion achieved through anaphoric referencing, lexical repetition, or subject-verb agreement. (2) Logical gaps between paragraphs. Each paragraph often presents arguments in isolation, lacking transitional phrases or progressive meaning, resulting in weak overall flow. (3) Flat text structure. Essays frequently fall into the simplistic pattern of "introduction-listing viewpoints-conclusion," struggling to develop layered analysis and argumentation around the central thesis.

At the cognitive strategy level, students predominantly function as "language replicators" rather than "idea organizers." During writing, they focus more on "how to use advanced vocabulary" and "how to construct complex sentences," neglecting overall content planning and logical framework design before putting pen to paper. Metacognitive strategies---such as pre-writing planning, in-writing monitoring, and post-writing evaluation or revision---are notably underutilized. Traditional outcome-oriented teaching coupled with delayed, summative teacher feedback further entrenches students' focus on the final product rather than the process, depriving them of opportunities to deepen their thinking and refine their structure through iterative revisions.

Therefore, Introducing the Thematic Progression Theory provides students with a set of metalinguistic tools to analyze discourse organization patterns and guide self-directed discourse construction, helping them overcome writing bottlenecks. Simultaneously, promoting the integration of language input and output while emphasizing the combination of reading and writing can assist English majors in resolving logical coherence issues in their writing. This approach also addresses shortcomings in writing instruction by English teachers, thereby offering feasible solutions for both teachers' teaching and students' learning.

4 Research Design

This study constructs a writing instruction model guided by the core principle of Thematic Progression Theory. The

model focuses on helping students identify and apply four common subject-promotion patterns (Danes, 1974; Huang, 1997): (1) Parallel type (same subject, different predicate); (2) Continuation (predicate or part of predicate from preceding sentence becomes subject in subsequent sentence); (3) Focus (different subject, same predicate); (4) Cross-over (subject from preceding sentence becomes predicate in subsequent sentence). The teaching model follows a cyclical path of “awareness raising—deconstruction and analysis—imitation and application—reflection and revision,” integrating theoretical analysis into integrated reading-writing teaching activities.

4.1 Research Process and Key Issues to Address

This study systematically introduces the Thematic Progression Theory into English writing instruction at private universities. Through a comparative teaching experiment, it examines the theory's effectiveness in enhancing students' writing abilities, particularly discourse coherence. Following the experiment, a questionnaire survey will be conducted among students. By analyzing data from grades and collected questionnaires, the study aims to address the following questions: (1) Can writing instruction grounded in Thematic Progression Theory significantly improve students' English writing performance? (2) How does this teaching approach influence the usage patterns of subject-promotion structures in students' compositions? (3) What attitudes and perceptions do students hold toward this theory-guided writing instruction?

4.2 Steps of Experience

The thematic progression model emphasizes logical coherence in essay writing rather than the vocabulary and grammar traditionally prioritized in writing instruction. Consequently, its application requires learners to possess a certain foundation in vocabulary and grammar. Once wording and syntax are no longer primary obstacles to writing, this model enhances cohesion and coherence in compositions, thereby elevating students' writing proficiency. Consequently, this study employs a quasi-experimental design. Two natural classes of English majors (second-year students) from Qingdao City University's 2023 cohort were randomly assigned as the experimental group (N=36) and the control group (N=36). A pre-test confirmed no significant difference in writing proficiency between the groups prior to the experiment ($p>0.05$). The experimental period spanned one academic year (September 2024 to June 2025). The control group employed traditional outcome-based teaching centered on model essay analysis, sentence pattern drills, and teacher-led correction. The experimental group implemented the aforementioned main-point-driven writing instruction model, structured as a cyclical teaching unit (typically two weeks):

(1) Pre-test: All participating students were required to complete a timed essay on a given topic. Two English teachers with extensive teaching experience provided objective evaluations, and the final essay score was determined by averaging these assessments. Student scores were collected and used as pre-test data.

(2) Awareness Awakening and Input: Students engage in integrated reading-writing instruction following vocabulary and grammar learning. Drawing from reading materials and writing exercises provided in each unit, instructors select one or more paragraphs to guide students through thematic progression analysis. Gradually require students to independently perform thematic progression analysis on designated passages from reading materials after class.

(3) Analysis and Deconstruction: Students are divided into groups or work collectively to identify themes and rhemes in assigned reading passages, then draw thematic progression pattern diagrams to visually understand how information flows unfold.

(4) Imitation and Application: After completing each unit, students learn how paragraphs are developed based on writing tasks. They imitate the structural patterns of reading materials, using the thematic progression model as guidance to complete a themed essay. Teachers continuously guide students in applying the thematic progression model to develop topics and enhance contextual coherence in writing.

(5) Feedback and Revision: During grading, teachers specifically evaluate students' application of the thematic progression model and provide targeted feedback. Peer reviews are arranged, focusing on paragraph transitions and logical progression. Students revise their work based on feedback.

(6) Post-test: All participants again complete a timed writing task using the Thematic Progression Theory, matching the difficulty level of the pre-test. Data collected serves as post-experimental data.

(7) Questionnaire Survey: Identical questionnaires are distributed to both the control and experimental groups. The 10-item survey primarily assesses students' attitudes toward English writing and writing difficulties. Simultaneously, a random sample of experimental group students undergoes semi-structured interviews to gather insights on their learning experiences with the Thematic Progression Theory and its impact on writing.

(8) Data Analysis: Descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests are conducted on writing scores using SPSS 26.0. Questionnaire data undergo descriptive analysis. Text analysis results are subjected to frequency statistics. Interview transcripts are analyzed using thematic content analysis.

4.3 Data Analysis and Research Findings

4.3.1 Quantitative Analysis

The analysis yielded the following conclusions: (1) Pre-test essays were categorized into high, medium, and low score brackets based on their scores. One essay was randomly selected from each bracket for a main-position advancement analysis: The most frequent types in the three pre-test essays were T-T and R-R. Additionally, a single essay contained numerous unrelated T and R elements. High-scoring essays exhibited fewer complex thematic progression patterns such as T-R or T1-Tn+1. This indicates that students' pre-test essays lacked rigorous logical coherence, featured significant semantic leaps, and rarely employed complex sentence structures. (2) High-scoring post-test essays showed a marked decrease in T-T and R-R usage, while employing more complex sentences than before. Students utilized intricate main-clause progression patterns like T-R, T1-Tn+1, and T-T1+n to advance discourse cohesively. Low-scoring essays still predominantly rely on single-mode sentence progression. While a clear tendency toward complex sentence structures is evident, students' limited grammatical and lexical resources result in unclear semantic expression. (3) Most students achieved higher essay scores compared to the pre-test. Some students who scored lower acknowledged that sentence progression patterns effectively enhance logical coherence between sentences, but emphasized that mastering their flexible application requires extensive practice.

4.3.2 Text Analysis

Text analysis of pre- and post-test essays in the experimental group reveals positive changes in students' use of thematic progression patterns:

(1) Increased pattern diversity. The average number of progression pattern types used per post-test essay rose from 1.5 to 2.8, indicating students began combining parallel and sequential patterns within their writing.

(2) Improved appropriateness of pattern application. In argumentative writing, students more consciously employed "continuation" patterns to deepen their arguments layer by layer and used 'parallel' patterns when listing evidence to maintain topic focus. The "main clause jumps" (unrelated main clauses in consecutive sentences) commonly observed in the pre-test significantly decreased.

(3) Enhanced awareness of paragraph topic sentences. The opening sentence (often serving as the paragraph's main clause) now aligns more closely with the essay's central thesis. Sentences within paragraphs increasingly derive their main clauses naturally from the paragraph's main clause or extend upon it, improving overall coherence.

4.3.3 Cognitive and Attitudinal Feedback

Survey and interview results revealed shifts in students' subjective perspectives:

(1) Shift in writing concepts. Over 80% of students agreed that "After learning thematic progression, I pay more attention to the logical relationships between sentences rather than just whether individual sentences are correct."

(2) Development of metacognitive strategies. Many students reported that before writing, they would "first consider what the paragraph primarily conveys (the topic), then plan how to progressively clarify this point step by step (descriptive progression)". This preemptive "outline planning" represents a significant advancement in their writing strategies.

(3) Recognition of Teaching Methods. 75% of students felt that thematic progression analysis "strengthens the connection between reading and writing," while 70% noted that "teacher feedback became more targeted, helping me understand how to revise for greater coherence." Some students also reported initial difficulties grasping theoretical concepts, indicating a need for more practical exercises.

4.3.4 Research Findings

This study confirms that integrating the Thematic Progression Theory system into writing instruction effectively enhances discourse construction skills among English majors at private universities. Its mechanism of action is as follows: First, the theory provides students with a "microscope" for analyzing discourse coherence and a blueprint for constructing discourse, elevating their understanding of "well-written texts" from intuitive to rational cognition. Second, through sustained "analyze-imitate-apply" training, students internalize fundamental rules of information organization, enabling conscious macro-level control during writing. Third, by focusing feedback and revision on discourse logic, students shift their attention from linguistic form errors to semantic progression, reorienting the core of writing training.

However, the study also found that the effectiveness of applying these theories correlates with students' existing linguistic foundations and comprehension abilities. The key to successful teaching lies in transforming abstract linguistic theories into more accessible, step-by-step classroom activities. Furthermore, this teaching model places higher demands

on teachers' discourse analysis competencies.

5 Conclusion

This study demonstrates through a year-long teaching experiment that a writing instruction model grounded in the Thematic Progression Theory effectively enhances the writing abilities of English majors in private universities, particularly in strengthening the logical structure and content coherence of their writing. By equipping students with tools for analyzing discourse and frameworks for constructing discourse, this model successfully guides them to expand their writing focus from the sentence level to the discourse level, achieving a significant shift in writing concepts and strategies.

The study's implications suggest that enhancing foreign language teaching quality in private universities necessitates the absorption and application of cutting-edge disciplinary theories. Creatively transforming linguistic theories like thematic progression into pedagogical productivity represents an effective pathway for deepening teaching reform and cultivating high-caliber applied foreign language professionals. Future research may further explore the application of this theory in teaching different genres (e.g., expository and descriptive writing) or integrate it with other discourse analysis methods to construct a more diverse and multidimensional writing instruction system.

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