Thematic Progression Analysis in Teaching Explanation Writing

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Abstract

Thematic Progression theory explains textual meanings of how experiential and interpersonal meanings are organized in a linear and coherent way. Employing the rationale of T-P theory, this article analyses a lesson plan of teaching Explanation, and shows that T-P analysis can be employed in teaching writing.

Keywords: Thematic Progression, Teaching writing, Rationale

1. Introduction

The using of Themes reveals the organization of a text on all levels. Theme, according to Halliday (1994:38), is "what the message is concerned with: the point of departure for what the speaker is going to say" in a clause. At the level of a clause complex (paragraph), the first clause will be taken as the theme (topic sentence), while at the level of a text, the first clause or clause complex will be regarded as the departure of what the author is going to say in the article (Butt, Fahey, Feez, Spinks & Yallop, 2000). On the other hand, Rheme includes what the author wants to tell about the Theme, which should be new and interesting to the reader (according to the writer). While using Theme as signposts and Rheme as information fills-in in presenting new knowledge to readers, a writer used to develop new Themes from elements (Themes or Rhemes) mentioned in the last clause or clause appeared not long ago or the topic clauses. In doing so, he/she can keep the article a well-organized unity with a clear line of information development and a clear focus on the topic. The progression of new Themes is called Thematic Progression (Butt et al, 2000), which has textual meanings of how experiential and interpersonal meanings are organized in a linear and coherent way. The following example text shows one of the styles of Thematic Progression. For example:

//<u>Phonetics and phonology</u> are concerned with speech—with the ways in which humans produce and hear speech.//<u>Talking and listening to each other</u> are so much part of human life//<u>that they</u> often seem unremarkable.//


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T—R
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T—R
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T—R
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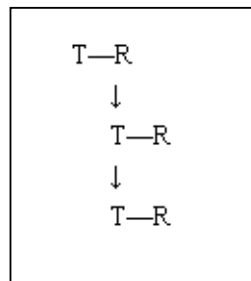
T-P analysis (Butt et al, 2000: 143)

In this lesson, I am going to use Thematic Progression in teaching my students Explanation writing. Explanation genre writing is a requisite in the syllabus of the writing course for non-major English learners in Chinese universities, especially for sciences majors. This is because one of the students' goals of learning English is to communicate with international counterparts in their majoring disciplines, and Explanation genre is very often used in such areas to account for why things are as they are. Students for whom this lesson plan is designed are geography majors. In the discipline of geography, Explanation is often used to explain natural phenomenon.

2. Lesson Plan

This lesson plan is part of the syllabus of a writing course designed for the non-major EFL learners in a Chinese university. The syllabus encourages skills integration, despite of its focus on writing. Students for whom this lesson plan will be used are geography majors, but they have been learning English (a requisite foreign language in Chinese schools and universities) for many years. Most of them can read normal articles in their discipline without much difficulty. One of the challenging difficulties is the size of the class, 50 students in a classroom, which is a common phenomenon in Chinese universities. The topic of this lesson is Explanation writing, with the aim of improving

students' skills in writing and objectives of students' abilities in analyzing information organization as well as using Themes correctly in writing an Explanation passage. After this lesson, students are expected to be able to understand information progression in Explanation passages and use Themes attentively to address readers in their writing. Resources used in this lesson are a sample text and a writing task of Explanation. The teaching strategy is task-based, while activities are collaborative learning, peer conferencing and group work discussion.

3. Rationale

The reason of choosing Thematic Progression analysis in teaching Explanation is that T-P analysis can best demonstrate how writer gives NEW information on the base of GIVEN information. The function of Explanation is to explain things. As a basic feature of Explanation, NEW information is developed on the base of GIVEN information by repeating one of the elements in the previous clause as the Theme of the next clause, in order to organize the article in a cohesively and orient readers from known to unknown. Hence, in Explanation writing, an awareness of information progression and skills of using of Themes to organize information sequence are crucial.

In choosing teaching materials, students' interest should be taken into account. My students are geography majors, so I deliberately choose a sample text and a writing task of Explanation in the same discipline. Hopefully these will meet students' interest and make them feel comfortable and significant in doing the task.

The main activity used in this lesson is a pair-work writing task. Students are required to do the task of writing in pairs, with one student cares for the content and grammar while the other student pays special attention to the organization of information. The rationale for pair-work is that an individual student might not be able to care for content, grammar (and sometimes vocabulary) and information organization at the same time, since students are not familiar to the skill before. A students set aside on information organization can guarantee a focus on the skill. Moreover, pair-work encourages collaborative learning and reduces anxiety. Another task is an activity of peer conferencing, a step advocated as effective by the approach of process writing (White & Arndt, 1991). The strategy of task-based approach has been acknowledged in motivating learners (Nunan, 1989; Skehan, 1996). In this lesson, an authentic task in the interest of learners, as mentioned above, must be able to amplify the motivation.

This lesson presents the skill of T-P analysis for the first time. (Since it is an EAP syllabus for largely science majors, text types such as Narrative and Personal Recount are not included. The text types of Information Report and Factual Recount, which precede Explanation in the syllabus, are regarded as too simple to get T-P theory involved.) As a skill to be mastered and consolidated, it should be recycled in the following lessons. The next lesson in this unit should provide more challenging tasks for students to practice. And the T-P theory in higher levels—in clause complex, paragraphs, or even text, can be introduced. In the next unit, Exposition, T-P theory should also be used and the two text types can be compared in styles of information organization. Another point worth mentioning is that this lesson meets the requirement of skills integration, which is encouraged by the syllabus. At the end of this lesson, teacher will draw implication of the use of T-P theory in other courses such as reading and listening comprehension. According to skills integration, the T-P theory should also be recycled in other courses as well.

One possible difficulty in using this lesson plan is the challenge of introducing the functions of Theme and Rheme briefly in such a short time. Theme and Rheme are not difficult to understand, but after all they are new things to students, because students have never heard about functional grammar before. If teacher is not confident in doing it, an alternative way is to avoid the terminology of Theme and Rheme, and use GIVEN and NEW information instead (use the text in Appendix 3-1 and T-P pattern in Appendix 3-2). The pair of GIVEN and NEW is not always equivalent to the pair of Theme and Rheme, e.g. the 3rd clause, but as general the GIVEN information serves as a line on which information is organized (see the complex T-P pattern in Appendix 3-2). Or, if time permits, the T-P pattern in Appendix 3-2 can also be used as a complement to Appendix 3-1.

Another difficulty may come from the large class size. 50 students fall into 25 pairs when they are doing the writing task. It is unavoidable that some pairs may have not mastered the T-P analysis (explained in the 2nd step of the lesson plan) so well and don't know how to follow the rules of information organization. Teacher should patrol the classroom and supply as much help as possible, in either the step of doing this task or the next step of peer conferencing. In case teacher finds that students have certain problems, he can still summarize the T-P theory pertinently as a make up at the ending step.

References

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Appendix 1: A Lesson Plan of Teaching Explanation Writing

Functional Grammar Focus: Thematic Progression

Text Type Focus: Explanation

Class Profile: Non-major (Geography) EFL learners of intermediate level, large-size class (50 students)

Learning Outcomes: After this lesson, students will be able to: a), Explain the way of information organization in Explanation through analysis of sample text's thematic progression. b), Write an eligible Explanation passage
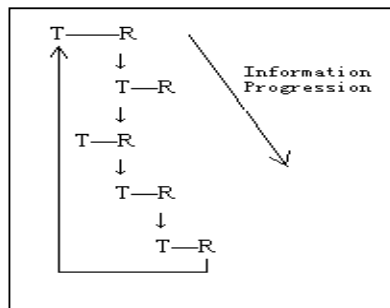
.Step / Time	Procedures / Activities	Resources	Rationale
1. Review and orientation (5 min)	● Briefly review generic features of Explanation (taught in the last lesson). Ss and T work together to fill in a blank table. ◆ Question & Answer (T-S)	Transparency & projector A table of main features of Explanation. (Appendix 2 as reference)	➢ Introduce new knowledge by reviewing the knowledge students have acquired. (K-W-L). ➢ Guiding students from general knowledge of the Explanation genre to the focus of its discourse features.
2. Thematic progression analysis (15 min)	● T analyzes the thematic progression of a sample Explanation text. Draw a T-P pattern. Focusing on: ◆ What's given information? ◆ What's new information? ◆ Why arrange like that?	Transparency & projector A sample text of Explanation, which has been used in the last lesson when introducing general generic features of Explanation. The sample text's T-P pattern. (Appendix 3-1 as reference)	➢ T-P pattern analysis help Ss understand the structural expression of cohesion: why the author arranges his writing like that. ➢ Theme and Rheme in each clause uncover the rules of giving new information.
3. Pair-work writing task (15 min)	● Ss work in pairs in writing an Explanation passage on a topic of "How Typhoon Comes into Being". (A thinks about content and grammar, while B concentrates on information arrangement, then discuss). ● Teacher patrols and help.	Transparency & projector - The sample text's T-P pattern shown for Ss' reference while they are doing.	➢ Task-based approach motivates students in learning. ➢ Pair-work encourages collaborative learning, facilitates interaction and reduces anxiety. ➢ Individual work might not guarantee the focus on information arrangement. Authentic task appeals to Geography students.
4. Pair-work peer conference (7 min)	● Ss exchange their works and do peer conference. A group of four, one pair checks another pair's work, focusing on information progression. Discuss and then give feedback. Teacher patrols and help.	Ss' works.	➢ Combine process-approach with genre-approach in teaching of writing.
5. Summary (3 min)	● T summarizes thematic progression. Draw implication on reading and listening.	Transparency & projector - The sample text's T-P pattern shown while for reference.	➢ Integrate the skills of writing with similar ones in reading and listening comprehension. Consolidate the learned skills.

Appendix 2: Generic features of Explanation

Text Type	Purpose	Organizational Structure	Features	
			Grammatical features	Other Features
Explanations	To explain how and why something works in a particular way or why something happened. e.g. explaining how computers work or why erosion occurs.	The focus is on explaining a phenomenon in a logical sequence: ● Statement about the phenomenon. ● Explanation of how/why the phenomenon takes place. ● Recommended action/response (optional)	● Generalized participants, things usually non-human. ● Connectors to do with time and cause-and effect (e.g. first, then, following, finally, if/then, so, since). ● Passive voice. ● Simple present tense for timeless statements, Past tense. ● Verbs and verb phrases—mainly action verbs.	● Vocabulary—general technical vocabulary ● Visuals (e.g. diagrams, photos) ● Style—relatively objective, formal ● Layout and presentation –may use headings, sub-headings, columns, text boxes, hypertext

Appendix 3-1: How are sedimentary Rocks Formed? T-P pattern

[1]Sedimentary rock is formed by the compression of layers of particles into a solid form. [2]Sediments such as sand and mud settle onto the floors of oceans and lakes. [3]Over a long period of time, several layers of sediments collect on the floor. [4]These layers are pressed together for many thousands of years, fusing the small solid particles of mud and sand to form solid rock. [5]This type of rock is called sedimentary rock.

Source: Wee, B. G. (2005), handouts for MAE 629

Appendix 3-2: More complex T-P pattern

Sedimentary rock (T)---…layers of particles…(R)
(given in title)   (new)

                    Sediments(particles)(T)---…oceans and lakes.(R)
                         (given)   (new)

Over…time (T)---layers of sediments…(R)
     (new)   (given)   ←*Marked Theme foreground circumstance*

               These layers (T)---…years, …rock. (R) ←*sub-clause not included*
                    (given)   (new)

                    This type of rock(T)---…rock.(R)
                         (given)   (reiteration)

Information progression