A Study of Thematic Progression in the English Writing Teaching of English Majors

Li-Li DONG
Jilin Agricultural University, Changchun, Jilin, China
lilyd1009@163.com

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Abstract. The English writing of English majors is always a studying project of English writing teachers. This study, under the guidance of the theories and patterns of thematic progression, and with the subjects of sophomore English majors in Jilin Agricultural University, finds out that thematic progression cultivates Chinese students’ English thinking, and helps them to produce coherent and standard English writing.

Introduction

English writing teaching is consistently the important subject of English teaching studies, and in recent years, it is attracting more and more attention from English teachers and researchers. Although English writing has been studied for many years, it always remains to be the most difficult part of teaching in that with the teachers’ one year or even several years of efforts, the writing level of students does not improve much. And some other English writing teachers find it difficult to approach to the teaching of English writing: how to teach? What kind of English writing teaching is effective teaching?

English teachers, especially teachers teaching English writing to English majors, have been studying this subject for a long time, hoping to find approaches to the solution to all these problems. This study believes the use of thematic progression can improve students’ English writing in achieving coherence and cultivating correct writing thinking, and the modes of thematic progression help English majors to avoid Chinglish and encourage them to produce long sentences.

Patterns of Thematic Progression

The concepts of theme and rheme were first proposed by Czech linguist Mathesius in 1939, who stated, according to the functions of different sentence elements in practical communication, a sentence could be divided into two parts. The beginning part which presents the topic is theme, and all other sentence elements are around this topic. Rheme, however, is the part to follow the theme, and it is the compensation, the emphasis and the interpretation of the theme. Their relation can be showed through the formula: a sentence = theme + rheme. The combination of the theme and the rheme within a sentence is thematic structure.

M.A.K Halliday did further studies in thematic structure. In 1994, in his book, An Introduction to Functional Grammar, he noted that the theme was the first element of a sentence, the beginning point of information expression and the known information, while the rheme, which develops itself around the theme, was the new information. Every sentence has
its own thematic structure. In one single sentence, the theme and rheme is fixed and isolated. However, if speakers want to express complete thoughts, they need to resort to a discourse, which is made up of two or more sentences. Then the theme of the previous sentence, the theme of the following sentence, the rheme of the previous sentence and the rheme of the following sentence etc must be associated to each other. The association, as well as the changes, between the previous sentence and the following sentence is called thematic progression. It is the very progression that smooths the discourse and helps achieve coherence.

In 1974, functional linguists Danes et al, after analysing some complicated language data, proposed several patterns of thematic progression, which can be showed with the following formulae:

TP pattern 1 (The same theme, but different rhemes)

\[
T_1 = T_2 \ldots T_n \rightarrow R_1 \rightarrow R_2 \rightarrow \ldots \rightarrow R_n
\]

TP pattern 2 (Different themes, but the same rheme)

\[
T_1 \rightarrow T_2 \rightarrow \ldots \rightarrow T_n \rightarrow R_1 = R_2 \ldots = R_n
\]

TP Pattern 3 (The former rheme is the theme of next sentence.)

\[
T_1 \rightarrow R_1 \\
T_2 = R_1 \rightarrow R_2 \\
\ldots \\
T_n = R_{n-1} \rightarrow R_n
\]

TP Pattern 4 (The former theme is the rheme of next sentence.)

\[
T_1 \rightarrow R_1 \\
T_2 \rightarrow R_2 = T_1 \\
\ldots \\
T_n \rightarrow R_n = T_{n-1}
\]

Application of Thematic Progression in the English Writing Teaching of English Majors

The subjects are English majors from College of Foreign Languages of Jilin Agricultural University. The writing course for them starts from the third semester and lasts until the end of the fourth semester in the second grade, with the TEM-4 in between every April. In class,
the English writing teacher gave lectures on thematic structure and patterns of thematic progression while lecturing on basic writing skills, in order to lay a solid theoretical foundation for them and put the theories into practice.

With the theories and patterns of thematic progression, students start to practise choosing themes within a sentence, and try to adopt different themes and rhemes for expressing the same meaning. They may place known information and new information better in order to express themselves in various ways. For example,

A. My brother worked out the problem.
B. It was my brother who worked out the problem.

From this kind of practice, students can learn to choose the most appropriate thematic structure and can notice the differences brought about by using different thematic structures.

Then students are to write small paragraphs by employing different patterns of thematic progression in order to further master the theories and find out the relations between the thematic patterns and different styles of English writing.

Thematic progression takes discourses as the basic units of information transmission. The master of the rules of cohesion and transition between themes and rhemes of sentences enables student writers to think wholly of the discourse, thus to achieve coherence and natural transition. The practice of putting thematic progression into English writing is of significant use.

Conclusion

The English writing of English majors can be better than non-English majors, but there are still problems of inappropriateness of word use and the appearance of certain grammatical mistakes; however, the biggest problem is still the Chinglish resulted from Chinese thinking. Under the guidance of the theories and patterns of thematic progression, and with the subjects of sophomore English majors in Jilin Agricultural University, this study finds out that these theories cultivate Chinese students’ English thinking, and help them to produce coherent and standard English writing. The study, which makes good use of the basic and obligatory English writing course in the second grade, favorably provides assistance to English majors to prepare for the advanced studies in the later years and helps them to pass TEM-4.

References


