

# การสอนการเขียนแบบเน้นประเภท: วิเคราะห์ระบบข้อความหลักในการเขียนเรียงความภาษาอังกฤษเชิงอธิบาย

## Genre-based Writing Instruction: Theme Analysis of EFL Expository Essays

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### บทคัดย่อ

การสอนประเภทของงานเขียน(genre)ให้ชัดเจนว่า มีรูปแบบและโครงสร้างทางภาษาที่สำคัญของแต่ละประเภทงานเขียนอาจเป็นวิธีการสอนที่มีประสิทธิภาพมากกว่า สามารถช่วยให้นักศึกษาที่ศึกษาภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศพัฒนาทักษะการเขียนงานวิชาการเป็นภาษาอังกฤษการศึกษาในระดับบัณฑิตศึกษา รายงานทางวิชาการต่างๆ มักต้องใช้การเขียนเชิงอธิบาย (expository writing) รายงานวิจัยฉบับนี้ศึกษาวิธีการเรียบเรียง ความเด่นของข้อความหลัก (theme markedness) และการเรียงร้อยเพื่อพัฒนาข้อความหลัก (theme progression) ในงานเขียนเชิงอธิบายของนักศึกษาศาสตรบัณฑิตบัณฑิตศึกษาหลักสูตรนานาชาติที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาในการสื่อสารกลุ่มนักศึกษาได้ศึกษารูปแบบการเขียนสไลด์ต่างๆ จากกิจกรรมในชั้นเรียนเพื่อนำไปใช้เขียนบทความเชิงอธิบาย ในระหว่างหลักสูตรการเตรียมความพร้อม 6 สัปดาห์ก่อนการเปิดภาคการศึกษาผู้วิจัยได้วิเคราะห์เปรียบเทียบงานเขียนก่อนและหลังมีการตรวจทานงานกับเพื่อนร่วมชั้นเรียน (peer review) จำนวน 8 ชิ้นเพื่อศึกษาว่า จากมุมมองทฤษฎีไวยากรณ์ระบบและหน้าที่ (systemic functional linguistics) นักศึกษาจัดเรียงสร้างความเด่นของข้อความหลัก และพัฒนาข้อความหลัก ในงานเขียนอย่างไรจากการวิเคราะห์อภิหน้าที่ในงานเขียน (textual metafunction) พบว่า นักศึกษาสามารถปรับปรุงโครงสร้างทางภาษาศาสตร์ที่ใช้เพื่อสร้างความเด่นให้ข้อความหลักและพัฒนาข้อความหลักได้ดีขึ้นอย่างมีนัยยะความสามารถในแก้ไขงานเขียนให้สื่อสารความได้ดั่งขึ้นนั้นชี้ให้เห็นว่า การสอนประเภทของงานเขียนในเชิงโครงสร้างทางภาษาศาสตร์ในการสร้างความหมาย ช่วยให้นักศึกษามีความเข้าใจเพิ่มขึ้นในการสร้างความหมายต่างๆ ที่ต้องการสื่อสารในการเขียนงานเชิงวิชาการภาษาอังกฤษซึ่งเป็นประโยชน์อย่างยิ่งในบริบทที่การเข้าร่วมประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียนได้เริ่มขึ้นอย่างเป็นทางการแล้ว และใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษากลางในการสื่อสารในห้องเรียนเพื่อรองรับจำนวนนักศึกษาจากกลุ่มประเทศอาเซียนที่มีแนวโน้มมากขึ้น

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## Abstract

Explicit instruction of a genre-based approach in writing has been proposed as a more efficient methodology to assist EFL learners to develop their academic writing skills. For graduate studies, students are usually required to produce several academic papers which mainly entail expository writing. This paper investigated EFL expository essays of engineering graduate students in an English-mediated master's degree program in terms of theme markedness and theme progression. Different writing styles to produce an expository essay were taught with explicit teaching of language patterns and structure focus during the six-week preparatory course. Drawn on systemic functional linguistics (SFL), eight expository texts were analyzed to explore how students organized and structured their texts. More specifically, a comparison of the written text before and after the peer review was examined to find out how theme markedness and theme progression were realized. The textual metafunction analysis showed significant improvement of linguistic features for theme markedness and theme progression. The results highlight benefits of linguistically genre-based pedagogy to enhance EFL students' comprehension in meaning making for academic writing, especially in the context which the official implementation of AEC in which English is used as a working language to accommodate an increasing number of ASEAN students in a classroom at Thai universities.

**Keywords:** academic language writing, EFL, theme analysis, systemic functional linguistics, genre-based approach

## Introduction

The integration of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 has led to considerable English-mediated programs as one of the responses to accommodate multilingual classrooms with students and teachers from a diverse culture in several subject areas. The emergence of new academic language patterns that incorporates a dual focus on the English as a working language and content is inevitably a challenge. As part of a six-week preparatory course which aimed to promote EFL graduate students' academic language development in reading, writing, and speaking prior to the

subject content course, this particular study primarily focuses on the development of academic writing skills of EFL students from ASEAN countries.

In an academic setting, several studies on EFL writing have shown that developing writing skills for academic language in English is quite a painstaking task (e.g. Foley, 2005; Kim, 2006; Lin, 2003). In order to help EFL students to improve their EFL academic writing, several studies advocated explicit instruction of genre-based approach in EFL writing classes for, mostly advanced, learners to produce cohesive and coherent texts (Byrnes, 2009, Chaisiri, 2010; Christie, 1999; Luu, 2011;

Qing-feng, 2010; Yang et al, 2007; Yasuda, 2011). Through explicit writing instruction of genre-based approach, this study, based on systemic functional linguistics (SFL), examined how Theme was marked and progressed in an expository essay produced by ASEAN EFL students. The essay before and after the peer review activity oriented toward functional grammar for meaning making is the focus of the analysis in seeing how linguistic features in terms of Theme were made.

### Theoretical Framework

In this study, explicit genre-based pedagogy refers to an adaption of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) which views a language as a resource for making meaning in a particular context of use rather than as a set of fixed rules and structures (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999; Martin, 2009; Martin & Rose, 2008). It was originally articulated by Halliday in the 1960s. SFL primarily involves the relationship between textual production over social process or its context of learners. In doing so, meaning and form are inseparable to describe meaning potential in language with certain linguistic choices relevant to a genre. In any text construction, three kinds of meaning, that is, the ideational, the construal of our worldviews; the interpersonal, our social relationship; and the textual, the creation of relevance to the context (Halliday, 1994) are simultaneously realized through a language.

The textual meaning is realized through the system of theme, a starting point of the

clause message and rheme, which is the rest of the clause in which the theme is developed. In SFL, theme concerns what the clause is about. In English, theme is realized at the initial position in a clause. Theme structures and connects the ideational and interpersonal meaning. Thus, it plays an important role in creating a coherent and cohesive message. Theme choices enable a writer to convey their viewpoint in different patterns. Theme comes first, followed by rheme. Theme that "is conflated with the subject" is considered as "unmarked theme"; on the contrary, theme that is not subject is "marked theme" (Halliday, 1994). Choices in theme markedness in a text reflect the diversity of the writer's linguistic resource. It is used to emphasize one idea over another in meaning making (Thomson, 2005).

According to Halliday (1994), based on its complexity, theme is classified into three categories: simple theme, multiple theme, and clause as a theme. Simple theme consists of one structural element and is represented by one nominal group, adverbial group or prepositional phrase. If the initial position of a clause is non-subject, this constituent has a marked theme. Multiple themes involve two clauses where conjunctive adjuncts, or what are called "textual theme", are used to relate two clauses together. Clause as a theme refers to a complex structure of a main clause and a dependent clause which serves as a theme for the whole clause complex.

Theme progression involves the relationship between the theme of a clause as the themes and rhemes of subsequent clauses in a written text. Linear progression and iterative

progression are two patterns of theme progression. In the former, theme of a clause is developed from rheme of earlier clause while the latter is used when theme was repeated or co-referred in subsequent clauses (Thomson, 2005).

SFL draw attention to promote evidence-based interpretation by the students through the use linguistic constructs to improve the student's academic writing in their own discipline. In this approach, student writers, as Luu (2011, p. 123) stated, are requested to take the overall social purposes of a text into account when composing a text. To academically succeed in the discipline, EFL students need to acquire a particular discourse of their academic community in order to be able to produce acceptable texts in regards to grammar, organization, and content. Through their participation during the meaning making exchange and interaction with peers and the teachers, student writers acquire the knowledge of linguistics, contents, and ideas for their own composition.

From a pedagogical perspective, several studies have suggested that EFL students, when explicitly taught, would have a framework to learn and promote the development of features of grammar and discourse valued in English academic communities (Brynes, 2009, Chaisiri, 2010; Christie, 1999; Luu, 2011; Qing-feng, 2010; Yang et al, 2007; Yasuda, 2011). However, the studies on genre learning primarily involved "advanced" writing learners while this particular study involved EFL students whose language proficiency was varied-mostly beginning intermediate. In addition, these EFL

writers are likely to approach EFL academic writing with the belief that a writing essay is autonomous and context free. Given that, explicit instruction of linguistic features relevant to each writing style for an expository essay may help them become aware of "language as a meaning-making system" (Martin, 2009, p. 11) and, subsequently, use language to make meaning in a text construction more effectively. Given that, the research question of this study is: How does linguistically genre-based writing instruction, when explicitly taught, help graduate students to realize theme markedness and theme progression in an expository writing task?

## Research methodology

In this study, EFL graduate students, on their voluntary basis, took a preparatory Academic English course before their international master's degree program officially started. It is a 6-week course where 18 hours are allocated for expository writing. The majority of student population in this graduate program is Thai. Only one ASEAN student from Cambodia took this course where the medium of the instruction is English. Explicit genre instruction of expository writing as a process, together with a focus on relevant linguistics features was given to enable the students to see the relationship between functional goals and linguistic resources. Connecting devices and transitional signals used to manage the flow of information were presented and practiced through exercises altogether in the classroom. Five different writing styles to produce an expository essay, including definition,

classification, comparison-contrast, cause-and-effect, and problem-solution, were taught.

For this particular research, to investigate how explicit genre-based writing instruction affected EFL academic writing, a total of eight expository essays written by graduate students from different engineering majors was chosen for theme analysis.

After being introduced to and practicing a range of linguistic choices available for a comparison-and-contrast writing style, individual students were assigned to write a comparison-and-contrast expository essay of 120-150 words on the topic of chocolate. The purpose of this assignment was to compare and contrast two chocolate brands available in their community. To deliberately place a focus on language awareness and rhetorical choices of a given writing style, they were asked to include conjunctive adjuncts to better structure their ideas and texts in their first draft. A Venn diagram was given to them in order to facilitate their text organization.

After grading their written assignment, four writing essays were selected for peer review in a classroom where teachers acted as a facilitator. Individual students were asked to grade the essay prior to the peer review. The grading rubric included a) meaning, b) purpose of writing, c) organization, d) structure and grammar, and e) spelling, word choices, and punctuation. They all agreed that the essay needed a significant revision as shown in the scoring of 5.15, 6.3, 7.3 and 7.62. Later, the researcher asked the students to form a group of three with whom they never worked collaboratively before. During the peer review,

the students were asked to pay attention to how theme choices were realized and how successfully cohesive devices were employed. Based on their comments, each group rewrote the essay. In total, eight writing essays, four before the peer review and the other four after the peer review, were collected for the topic under investigation, that is, theme analysis.

Initially, the instructor displayed her preference for having the student identify problems himself and self-correct them based on SFL they had been trained before; however, the student, as a novice EFL writer, was unable to pinpoint and utter writing problems. With the instructor's initiation, each group took a more active role in doing so. Candidate revisions and alternative ways of outlining, word choices, and phrasing the texts were scaffolded by the instructor.

To discover how students organized and structured their texts, a comparison of the eight written texts, four before the peer review and the other four after the peer review, based on SFL, was coded on how theme was markedness and progressed.

## Findings

Eight expository essays in which a comparison- and- contrast writing style was the focus showed that the students could transfer linguistic choices to their writing assignment both before and after the peer review. Yet, some misunderstanding in those language choices available to produce this particular writing style was still apparent with serious surface grammatical errors in the before-the-peer-re-

view draft. The reinforcement of explicit SFL explanation which was offered throughout the peer response activity to offer an array of language options in the construal of meaning making in their expository assignment led to improvement in the revision in terms of theme markedness and theme progression. In the essays was reflected the students' awareness of the power of linguistic choices in structuring the text, where minor, but fewer, grammatical errors still existed. They could rewrite more coherent and cohesive texts with clearer content and organization, together with appropriate English grammar. Theme and rheme were reorganized, regrouped, or even rewritten to refine the structuring of their comparison-and-contrast expository essay. A revision talk, through the SFL-oriented approach, enabled the students to better select suitable types of clauses to form and elaborate their argument, resulting in a variety use for theme markedness, and theme progression. Several conjunctive devices were also used more correctly and properly to link the ideas and construct the flow of information.

### **Theme markedness**

A marked theme is used to signal a special attention within the clause to something other than the subject of the clause (Halliday, 1994). Instead of largely beginning a clause with topical theme throughout the expository text, these graduate students were able to recognize the use of other types of theme as a departure point for each text as a text evolved (Halliday, 1994). The topical theme in these

eight essays was marked with such circumstantial adjuncts as *in Thailand, these days, recently, for distinctive ingredients, because of* .... Dependent clauses beginning with such subordinating conjunctions as *although, since* were also used as marked themes to signal the coherence of the text. Almost all the students were able to make use of linguistic resources presented during the class to markedly thematize the argument.

Yet, the essay contained considerable weaknesses in terms of theme markedness and surface grammatical structure in the realization of meaning making. In the revision draft, theme analysis suggested that, through the instructor's explicit scaffolding in an array of linguistic choices pertaining to how to produce a better expository essay, they were able to revise the texts with better theme choices, lexical items, syntactical structures and text structuring. The clauses were significantly shortened to better structure and develop information in discourse. They understood why a long sentence resulted in unclear meaning with less focus. They could recognize how linguistic features contributed to different meaning interpretations. The analysis further demonstrated that such interpersonal theme as *to me* and *in my opinion* in the initial position, like the above circumstantial adjuncts and connecting device, was better used to constitute a marked choice of theme when elaborating the EFL learner social relationship to the given topic. The use of pronoun *I* and *you* was also more properly incorporated for the social manifestation.

Table 1 and Table 2 summarize the use of linguistic features before and after the peer

response in terms of how theme was realized. Drawn on SFL analysis, it reveals that explicit genre-based instruction through the SFL-oriented approach allowed these graduate students to have a tool to notice and work on content and rhetorical problems in their expository text, especially for their own revision.

**Table 1:** Summary of Theme and Rheme Analysis before the Peer Review Activity

| Category                       | Text | Text | Text | Text |
|--------------------------------|------|------|------|------|
|                                | 1    | 2    | 3    | 4    |
| Markedness                     | 2    | -    | 4    | 4    |
| Simple theme                   | 3    | 4    | 6    | -    |
| Multiple theme                 | -    | 2    | 3    | 4    |
| Clause as a theme              | 1    | -    | 1    | 1    |
| Interpersonal element as theme | -    | 1    | 1    | -    |
| Textual element as theme       | 4    | 9    | 8    | 5    |

**Table 2:** Summary of Theme and Rheme Analysis after the Peer Review Activity

| Category                       | Text | Text | Text | Text |
|--------------------------------|------|------|------|------|
|                                | 1    | 2    | 3    | 4    |
| Markedness                     | 4    | 1    | 3    | 1    |
| Simple theme                   | 7    | 3    | 7    | 7    |
| Multiple theme                 | -    | 1    | -    | 1    |
| Clause as a theme              | 1    | -    | 1    | -    |
| Interpersonal element as theme | 1    | 1    | 1    | -    |
| Textual element as theme       | 2    | 9    | 4    | 14   |

### Theme progression

The interaction between lexical strings and reference chains constitutes a text’s theme progression (Danes, 1974 as cited in Belmonte & Hidalgo, 1998). In terms of text coherence, the analysis showed that these graduate students favored iterative theme progression over linear one. They rarely used the rheme in the previous clauses as a starting point to develop logical and more elaborated arguments. Explicit genre writing instruction apparently provided the students a linguistic resource for cohesion. Yet, such cohesion devices were not appropriately used to give coherence to the text and build the argument. Like EFL/ESL students, the graduates in this study overtly relied on textual thematic choices to structure the flow of the argument (Schleppegrell, 2004 and Belmonte & Hidalgo, 1998). Textual themes such as *first of all, in addition, furthermore, moreover, finally, lastly, to sum up, in conclusion, nonetheless, in the same way, (un)like ..., on the contrary, however, likewise, for example, but, and, although, because, that, which, while, whereas* were overly used to develop their argument. Despite the fact that the overuse of these cohesive devices could link themes, the expository essays were organized more toward a list-like fashion, rather than expanding on information introduced in the rhemes. These graduate students did not go into depth on the ideas introduced in the rhemes. This inappropriate and undue use of conjunctive adverbs was largely made in the first draft, partly due to the instructor’s encouragement before the assignment.

The instructor's initiation on linguistic choices for potential meaning making drew the students' active participation during the peer review, resulting in significant improvement for their theme progression in their expository essay. Rather than relying on solely on connecting devices, the students could include more linear, where necessary, thematic progression to build up an argument in their revision draft. They could combine clauses and make use of embedded clauses more properly and correctly to present their argument logically in a coherent and tightly-organized fashion. In the revision draft, the SFL analysis revealed that the students learned how to better structure their expository essay through the use of these textual devices, where appropriate, to heighten the argument even though some still overtly and heavily relied on the textual mechanism.

**Table 3:** Analysis of theme progression before the peer review activity

| Category                    | Text 1 | Text 2 | Text 3 | Text 4 |
|-----------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Iterative theme progression | 6      | 2      | 2      | 4      |
| Linear progression          | 0      | 0      | 2      | 0      |

**Table 4:** Analysis of theme progression after the peer review activity

| Category                    | Text 1 | Text 2 | Text 3 | Text 4 |
|-----------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Iterative theme progression | 7      | 6      | 3      | 5      |
| Linear progression          | 2      | 2      | 3      | 3      |

Table 3 and Table 4 summarize the use of theme progression in an expository writing before and after the peer review. To clarify and refine the theme in their argument, the graduate students were also able to notice the overuse of transitional device in a distorted fashion to manage the flow of the information as shown in Table 1 and Table 2. They also could realize that the length of each clause should be shortened and be no longer too lengthy to digress the focus of each clause. The number of words used in each clause was lessened in a significant way to better thematize the text.

## Discussion and conclusion

Based on the textual metafunction analysis of the expository essays both before and after the peer review activity, explicit genre-based writing instruction proved itself to be useful in an EFL classroom where knowledge of grammar is the only one pillar for a comprehensible input. Rather than having a focus on surface grammatical errors, the functional linguistics constructs of theme and rheme enables not only the EFL teacher but also students to analyze the organization of meaning- both content and rhetorical matters- in their EFL academic writing (Cheng, 2008 and Tardy, 2006, 2009). In this study, the EFL teacher could reinforce certain language patterns for proper meaning making on the given genre and topic while the EFL students learned how to have a point of reference to develop a topic, clarify ideas, and structure a text based on their accumulated linguistic resources (Berg, 1999; Liu & Hansen, 2005). The graduate



informants became more aware of the particular discourse of academic language in an expository essay and produced expository essays with various theme markedness and progression. Language development, as Ryshina-Pankova (2010) stated, does not involve “a decontextualized mechanical process of learning new lexical items,” but rather entails “an expansion in the meaning making abilities” (p. 194). With the scaffolding from the teacher and a co-construction of knowledge for expository writing among their peers, they learned to pay attention to how theme was realized and developed through lexical items, syntactical structures, and text outlining.

In sum, as Kibler (2011) described, explicit genre-based writing instruction could serve a dual role—developing students’ reading interpretation skills while simultaneously building up their academic writing skills in both their discipline and the EFL field. The official implementation of ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 has led every ASEAN country to prepare its citizen to become proficient in its mother language and the AEC working language, that is, English. Therefore, it is noteworthy to incorporate an explicit genre-based pedagogy into an academic writing class where diverse English proficiency level is quite prevalent. In SFL theory, developing language ability is largely associated with the expansion of registers, including the acquisition of genres representing various institutional, educational, and professional settings (Ryshina-Pankova, 2006). As graduate students are commonly required to read and write in English during their master’s degree program, a height-

ened awareness of the relationship between a genre and the linguistic resources for the construal of meaning can thus serve as a springboard for EFL writers, regardless of their language proficiency, to develop both writing skills and linguistic knowledge simultaneously. Last but not least, given the fact that the findings of this study are from the small number of writing tasks, future research should increase the corpus for analysis of the theme and rheme construct in EFL writing. Better selection of theme markedness and progression to construe the meaning of the expository may be reinforced by collective group writing practices. Yet, it should be primarily taken as evidence for the SFL-oriented writing approach explicitly taught during class.

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