

## Review Article

## Theme-Rheme Theory and Coherence of College English Writing

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**Abstract:** English writing is an important part of English learning. Each excellent English writing is inseparable from the cohesion and coherence. And the cohesion and coherence are interpreted by the Theme-Rheme theory, which can not only make the structure of the text compact but also enrich the content of the text. However, a great many teachers merely emphasize the explicit cohesion such as referring, omission, repetition, etc., ignoring the application of tacit Theme-Rheme theory in English writing teaching. Moreover, although the use of the obvious cohesion and the absence of grammatical mistakes, the written essay still can't achieve the cohesive and coherent effect. For the current situation of English writing teaching in China, this paper discusses the important function and practical significance of the thematic structure and thematic progression mode in cohesion and coherence of college students' English writing through the analysis of three different levels of compositions in College English Test-6 (CET6) from the perspective of Theme-Rheme theory.

**Keywords:** Thematic Structure, Thematic Progression Mode, Coherence, Cohesion, College English Writing.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

English writing, especially its coherence and cohesion, has always been the crucial concern in college English teaching. Accordingly, English teachers take great efforts to assume a range of skills for improving the coherence and cohesion of English writing. Nevertheless, the coherence and cohesion of English writing are exceedingly difficult to attain for most of students even if they have obtained the knowledge of lexical and grammar devices. Therefore, it is decidedly fundamental for applying Theme-Rheme theory into college English writing. Theme-Rheme theory is a dominant concept of the textual meta-function in the systematic functional grammar and puts a new premium on achieving the cohesive structure and coherent content in the discourse. Meanwhile, as cohesion and coherence are essential content in English writing teaching, Theme-Rheme theory is researched by many scholars for making students improve English writing. There are numerous scholars in our country who have done some early researches about Theme-Rheme theory, such as Xu Shenghuan (1982), Huang Yan (1985), Zhu Yongsheng (1995), etc. In recent years, Theme-Rheme theory about English and Chinese language has been studied by lots of researchers, for

instance, Fang Yan, Yang Xinzhang, Hu Zhuanglin (1994), etc (Halliday, M. A. K., 2000). Moreover, there are a number of rewarding explores in Theme-Rheme theory and English writing coherence, for example, Wang Xuewen (2010), Lin Guoli (2007), Song Yazhi (2008), etc. Based on the above researches, this paper discusses the important function and practical significance of thematic structure and thematic progression mode in cohesion and coherence of college students' English writing through the analysis of three different levels of compositions in College English Test-6 (CET6) from the perspective of Theme-Rheme theory.

## 2 Theme-Rheme Theory

Mathesius, the founder of Prague School, originally put forward Theme and Rheme. From the Functional Sentence Perspective, Rheme carrying the highest degree of Communicative Dynamism is more important than the Theme having the lowest degree of Communicative Dynamism. These two terms were accepted and developed by some linguistics of Functional Grammar School like Halliday (Thompson, 2000). Theme refers to the first constituent of a clause, which is the known information for the writer and

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reader. While, Rheme is the description of the Theme and the new information the writer intends to express. Comparatively speaking, Theme plays a primary role in Functional Grammar for orienting the topic and building the framework. Thompson (2000) separated Theme into simple Theme and multiple Theme considering the combined complexity. Similarly, Halliday (1985) added the clause Theme on the basis of the above. Simple Theme generally represents only one inseparable structure component. Multiple Theme contains at least two structural elements as experiential, interpersonal and textual aspects that may occur at the same time. Clause Theme is made up of a clause, the first part in the independent clause is the Theme of the whole clause complex, or the first dependent clause is the Theme of the whole clause complex.

Danes (1974), Czechoslovak linguist, initially defined Thematic progression as the complex relation between the Theme and Rheme in the discourse, for instance, the cohesion, coherence, reference, inclusion, etc. He put forward three kinds of Thematic progression modes, that is, linear progression, constant progression and extended progression. In addition, there are different classifications about Thematic progression in China like Xu Shenghuan's (1982) four patterns, Huang Yan's (1985) seven patterns, Huang Guowen's (1988) six patterns, Zhu Yongsheng's (1995) four patterns. The following explains four patterns usually used. Thematic consistent type shows that the Theme in the first clause is same as the Theme of all the rest clauses, but the Rheme is totally different. Rheme consistent type means the Rheme in the adjacent clauses is alike, but the Theme carries distinct features. Continuous type points that the Rheme of the former clause equals to the Theme of the later clause forming a continuous relationship and the adjacent subsequent sentences also have the same continuing relation. Derived type manifests that the Theme in the former clause is the Rheme of several following clauses.

### 3 The Application of Theme-Rheme Theory in College English Writing

English writing is an essential skill for college students. The improvement of English writing ability has to be under the guidance of Theme-Rheme theory. This theory is capable of improving the logical thinking

as well as constructing the tight framework for gaining the cohesion and coherence. What's more, combining some explicit methods like conjunctions, reference, ellipsis, repetition, etc. and the Theme-Rheme device into a composition is able to make the English writing more fluent and consistent. This paper chooses three different levels of the compositions having the same topic from College English Test-6 (CET6), that is, a high score essay, a mediate essay and a low score essay. The title of compositions is *Practice Makes Perfect* written by three students, which is selected randomly from the test papers of College English Test-6 (CET6) in June, 2012. In addition, three compositions have some grammar and expression mistakes that will not be corrected for the analysis objectively. Through comparing three essays, it will be analyzed from the perspective of Thematic structure and Thematic progression regarding Geoff Thompson's method for presenting some findings and giving some advice for improving the writing skills.

#### Sample 1 Practice Makes Perfect (14 points)

It is a famous saying (T<sub>1</sub>) that practice makes perfect (R<sub>1</sub>). The truth of it (T<sub>2</sub>) is self-evident (R<sub>2</sub>). The more (T<sub>3</sub>) you practise (R<sub>3</sub>), the more skillful (T<sub>4</sub>) you will be (R<sub>4</sub>). Moreover, you (T<sub>5</sub>) will find better ways of doing things (R<sub>5</sub>). As everyone (T<sub>6</sub>) can see practice helps us to be efficient (R<sub>6</sub>).

When we study English (T<sub>7</sub>), we have so much to learn such as grammar, vocabulary (R<sub>7</sub>). In order to learn it well (T<sub>8</sub>), we need much practice (R<sub>8</sub>). We (T<sub>9</sub>) must read a lot, write a lot (R<sub>9</sub>). Only through practice (T<sub>10</sub>) can we have a good command of it (R<sub>10</sub>). Do remember (T<sub>11</sub>) to practise if you want to speak English fluently and express yourself freely (R<sub>11</sub>).

Another case in point (T<sub>12</sub>) is typing (R<sub>12</sub>). A good typist (T<sub>13</sub>) can type fast and accurately (R<sub>13</sub>). But you (T<sub>14</sub>) will not be surprised at her performance if you know how much time she has spent practising (R<sub>14</sub>). Through practice (T<sub>15</sub>), she has both her typing speed and accuracy to be improved (R<sub>15</sub>).

It (T<sub>16</sub>) goes without saying (R<sub>16</sub>) that practice makes perfect (T<sub>16</sub>), since all of us have realized the importance of practice (R<sub>16</sub>), why not (T<sub>17</sub>) put it into practice (R<sub>17</sub>)?

Sample 1:

Par.1	T <sub>1</sub> .....R <sub>1</sub>	
	T <sub>2</sub> (=R <sub>1</sub> ).....R <sub>2</sub>	Continuous Type
	T <sub>3</sub> .....R <sub>3</sub>	
	T <sub>4</sub> (=T <sub>3</sub> ).....R <sub>4</sub>	Thematic Consistent Type
	T <sub>5</sub> .....R <sub>5</sub>	
	T <sub>6</sub> .....R <sub>6</sub> (=R <sub>1</sub> )	Rheme Consistent Type
Par.2	T <sub>7</sub> .....R <sub>7</sub>	
	T <sub>8</sub> (=R <sub>7</sub> ).....R <sub>8</sub> (=R <sub>3</sub> )	Continuous Type
	T <sub>9</sub> (=T <sub>7</sub> ).....R <sub>9</sub>	Thematic Consistent Type
	T <sub>10</sub> (=R <sub>3</sub> ).....R <sub>10</sub>	Derived Type
	T <sub>11</sub> .....R <sub>11</sub> (=R <sub>3</sub> )	Rheme Consistent Type

Par.3	T <sub>12</sub> .....R <sub>12</sub>	
	T <sub>13</sub> .....R <sub>13</sub> (=R <sub>12</sub> )	Rheme Consistent Type
	T <sub>14</sub> (=T <sub>5</sub> ).....R <sub>14</sub>	Thematic Consistent Type
	T <sub>15</sub> (=R <sub>3</sub> ).....R <sub>15</sub>	Derived Type
Par.4	T <sub>16</sub> (=R <sub>1</sub> ).....R <sub>16</sub>	Derived Type
	T <sub>17</sub> .....R <sub>17</sub> (=R <sub>3</sub> )	Rheme Consistent Type

After dividing the Theme and Rheme in this composition, statistical analysis shows that the simple Theme (T<sub>2</sub>, T<sub>3</sub>, T<sub>4</sub>, T<sub>9</sub>, T<sub>12</sub>, T<sub>13</sub>, T<sub>15</sub>, T<sub>17</sub>) is used for 8 times and accounts for 47%, the multiple Theme (T<sub>5</sub>, T<sub>6</sub>, T<sub>10</sub>, T<sub>11</sub>, T<sub>14</sub>) is applied for 5 times and accounts for 29%, and the clause Theme (T<sub>1</sub>, T<sub>7</sub>, T<sub>8</sub>, T<sub>16</sub>) is used for 4 times and accounts for 24%. The classifications of Theme in the composition have the feature of variety, transitivity and complexity, providing numerous of the given information and deep meaning to pave the way for the following clauses and paragraphs and boosting the cohesion and coherence. For another, as the rate of simple Theme is the highest, the topic and semantics are straightforward and easy to understand for readers, which strengthens the semantic coherence between writers and readers. The multiple Theme, adding the personal and discourse elements, occupies the second place, making the sentence pattern more colorful and enforcing the structure cohesion. As for clause Themes, although this kind of Themes are complex or complicated, they present a sense of hierarchy in the content layout, which is conducive to the layout cohesion of English writing.

And this text has applied four types of thematic progression modes, such as the thematic consistent type, Rheme consistent type, continuous type and derived type. Based on the statistics, it indicates that the Rheme consistent type accounts for 33% and occurs 4 times, the thematic consistent and derived type all account for 25% and occur 3 times, and the continuous type accounts for 17%. These datum reveal that the author clarifies this topic from varieties of perspectives, for instance, relating the Theme of the first clause as the Rheme of the next clause, concerning the Rheme of the last clause as the Theme of the second clause, using crossly the Theme and Rheme, etc., which

drives the coherence of the meaning and cohesion of construction, helping the reader to acquire the amount of information straightly, comprehending the ways of English thinking and grasping the English writing style. On the whole, this essay is closely related with the topic, expresses ideas fluently, clarifies the logic clearly, rarely makes grammar mistakes, having a better coherence and cohesion.

**Sample 2 Practice Makes Perfect (8 points)**

As we all known (T<sub>1</sub>), “Practice makes perfect” is an old saying (R<sub>1</sub>). It (T<sub>2</sub>) means that the more you practise, the more you know and get (R<sub>2</sub>). The saying (T<sub>3</sub>) can be found in every respect (R<sub>3</sub>).

For example, we (T<sub>4</sub>) learning English (R<sub>4</sub>). We (T<sub>5</sub>) have studied English for more than nine years (R<sub>5</sub>). At the beginning of the study (T<sub>6</sub>). Our word vocabulary (T<sub>7</sub>) is so limited increasing (R<sub>7</sub>). We (T<sub>8</sub>) practise speaking English, listening English, and so on (R<sub>8</sub>). Now we (T<sub>9</sub>) participant in the CET-4 to show our English standard (R<sub>9</sub>).

On the other hand, besides in learning English (T<sub>10</sub>), practice is useful to others (R<sub>10</sub>). when we (T<sub>11</sub>) are learning the new subject (R<sub>11</sub>). At first, we (T<sub>12</sub>) all find it difficult to master it (R<sub>12</sub>). But after hardworking and practice (T<sub>13</sub>), we gradually learn it well (R<sub>13</sub>). Practice (T<sub>14</sub>) is main method of learning everything (R<sub>14</sub>).

According to this (T<sub>15</sub>), we all know that the more you practise, the more you will know and get (R<sub>15</sub>). If you want to success (T<sub>16</sub>), you should have practise for a long time (R<sub>16</sub>). Because hard work, practice, and chances (T<sub>17</sub>) due to success (R<sub>17</sub>). Let’s (T<sub>18</sub>) try our best to practise more and more (R<sub>18</sub>).

**Sample 2:**

Par.1	T <sub>1</sub> .....R <sub>1</sub>	
	T <sub>2</sub> (=R <sub>1</sub> ).....R <sub>2</sub>	Derived Type
	T <sub>3</sub> (=R <sub>1</sub> ).....R <sub>3</sub>	Derived Type
Par.2	T <sub>4</sub> .....R <sub>4</sub>	
	T <sub>5</sub> (=T <sub>4</sub> ).....R <sub>5</sub>	Thematic Consistent Type
	T <sub>6</sub> .....R <sub>6</sub>	
	T <sub>7</sub> .....R <sub>7</sub>	
	T <sub>8</sub> (=T <sub>4</sub> ).....R <sub>8</sub>	Thematic Consistent Type
	T <sub>9</sub> (=T <sub>4</sub> ).....R <sub>9</sub>	Thematic Consistent Type
Par.3	T <sub>10</sub> .....R <sub>10</sub>	
	T <sub>11</sub> (=T <sub>4</sub> ).....R <sub>11</sub>	Thematic Consistent Type
	T <sub>12</sub> (=T <sub>4</sub> ).....R <sub>12</sub>	Thematic Consistent Type
	T <sub>13</sub> .....R <sub>13</sub> (=R <sub>11</sub> )	Rheme Consistent Type

	T <sub>14</sub> (=T <sub>13</sub> ).....R <sub>14</sub>	Thematic Consistent Type
Par.4	T <sub>15</sub> .....R <sub>15</sub> (=R <sub>2</sub> )	Rheme Consistent Type
	T <sub>16</sub> .....R <sub>16</sub>	Derived Type
	T <sub>17</sub> (=T <sub>13</sub> ).....R <sub>17</sub>	Thematic Consistent Type
	T <sub>18</sub> .....R <sub>18</sub> (=R <sub>1</sub> )	Rheme Consistent Type

According to the analysis of Theme and Rheme in this essay, it signals that the simple Theme (T<sub>2</sub>, T<sub>3</sub>, T<sub>5</sub>, T<sub>7</sub>, T<sub>8</sub>, T<sub>14</sub>, T<sub>18</sub>) is used for 7 times and accounts for 39%, the multiple Theme (T<sub>4</sub>, T<sub>6</sub>, T<sub>9</sub>, T<sub>11</sub>, T<sub>12</sub>, T<sub>13</sub>, T<sub>15</sub>, T<sub>17</sub>) is applied for 8 times and accounts for 44%, and the clause Theme (T<sub>1</sub>, T<sub>10</sub>, T<sub>16</sub>) is used for 3 times and accounts for 17%. It could be observed that the types of Theme used are diverse and rich, which is of great significance to improve the cohesion and coherence of the composition. The data indicates that the rate of multiple Theme is the highest and the clause Theme used is less than the simple and multiple Theme. As the second composition used more multiple Theme than the first one, the coherence of the second essay is less remarkable than the first one. Because there are some mistakes about the usage of the conjunction and the expression of the meaning, the score of second essay is lower than the first one.

This essay makes use of three kinds of thematic progression modes, for instance, the thematic consistent type, Rheme consistent type and derived type. According to the datum, it shows that thematic consistent type is 58% with 7 times, the Rheme consistent is 25% with 3 times and the derived type is 17% with 2 times. Observing these datum, this text uses many conjunctions and patterns of thematic progression, but they just be applied superficially,

casually and impertinently as most of the content is almost relevant with the topic, some clauses having the mistakes couldn't be expressed clearly, most structures are in a mess and the logic is unreasonable. All in all, this composition is generally related to the topic, some parts would be expressed vaguely, the semantics are lack of coherence, and the structures are short of cohesion. At the same time, there will be some serious mistakes about expression, logic and the grammar.

**Sample 3 Practice Makes Perfect (2 points)**

Do more and you (T<sub>1</sub>) do best (R<sub>1</sub>). It (T<sub>2</sub>) is a everyone know word (R<sub>2</sub>). But, how (T<sub>3</sub>) should we to understand it better (R<sub>3</sub>)? Let I (T<sub>4</sub>) show several examples for you (R<sub>4</sub>). The first example, in during of learning English (T<sub>5</sub>), we must have many difficult in it (R<sub>5</sub>). How (T<sub>6</sub>) can we solve it (R<sub>6</sub>)? The best way (T<sub>7</sub>) is learn it again and again, Until we can control it very good and it maybe deeply in our head for good (R<sub>7</sub>). It (T<sub>8</sub>) is do more (R<sub>8</sub>) and you (T<sub>9</sub>) do best (R<sub>9</sub>). The another example, many things in our lives (T<sub>10</sub>), we all can't do them once yet we should control them best (R<sub>10</sub>). It (T<sub>11</sub>) must be do several times (R<sub>11</sub>) and we (T<sub>12</sub>) can do them best (R<sub>12</sub>). Such as driving bus, cooking, study and so on (T<sub>13</sub>). Let us (T<sub>14</sub>) all remember this word when we are doing everything (R<sub>14</sub>). It (T<sub>15</sub>) will give us success (R<sub>15</sub>).

**Sample 3:**

Par.1	T <sub>1</sub> .....R <sub>1</sub>	
	T <sub>2</sub> .....R <sub>2</sub>	
	T <sub>3</sub> .....R <sub>3</sub>	
	T <sub>4</sub> .....R <sub>4</sub>	
	T <sub>5</sub> (=R <sub>4</sub> ).....R <sub>5</sub>	Derived Type
	T <sub>6</sub> (=T <sub>3</sub> ).....R <sub>6</sub>	Thematic Consistent Type
	T <sub>7</sub> .....R <sub>7</sub>	
	T <sub>8</sub> (=T <sub>2</sub> ).....R <sub>8</sub>	Thematic Consistent Type
	T <sub>9</sub> .....R <sub>9</sub> (=R <sub>1</sub> )	Rheme Consistent Type
	T <sub>10</sub> .....R <sub>10</sub>	
	T <sub>11</sub> (=R <sub>4</sub> ).....R <sub>11</sub>	Derived Type
	T <sub>12</sub> .....R <sub>12</sub> (=R <sub>1</sub> )	Rheme Consistent Type
	T <sub>13</sub> .....R <sub>13</sub>	
	T <sub>14</sub> .....R <sub>14</sub>	
	T <sub>15</sub> .....R <sub>15</sub>	

Based on the classification of Theme and Rheme in this text, it indicates that the simple Theme (T<sub>2</sub>, T<sub>4</sub>, T<sub>5</sub>, T<sub>6</sub>, T<sub>7</sub>, T<sub>8</sub>, T<sub>10</sub>, T<sub>11</sub>, T<sub>14</sub>, T<sub>15</sub>) is used for 10 times and accounts for 67%, the multiple Theme (T<sub>1</sub>, T<sub>3</sub>, T<sub>9</sub>, T<sub>12</sub>, T<sub>13</sub>) is applied for 5 times and accounts for 33%, and the clause Theme isn't used in this text. Compared with the former two compositions, the third

composition just applies the simple and multiple Themes, which is lack of the flexibility and accuracy. Meanwhile, the data indicates that the rate of simple Theme is the highest and is twice as high as the rate of multiple Theme and the clause Theme isn't used in here, that is, the proposition of thematic types used is severally out of balance. In addition, this composition has only one paragraph, the hierarchy is chaotic and the

content is insufficient. The whole composition is just for the sake of pure words and is serious lack of coherence and cohesion.

This composition uses three kinds of thematic progression modes, for example the thematic consistent type, Rheme consistent type and derived type. Concerning the datum, it reveals that thematic consistent type, the Rheme consistent and derived type all accounts for 33% with 2 times. This composition only covers six times of thematic progression modes in a long paragraph, which makes the whole article divergence and incoherence. Under the dividing the Theme and Rheme, the structure as well as the content of this text is in a mess. Also, the hierarchy and the main point of articles are stated chaotically. In general, the structure and the content are in a mess, the logic is vague, the complete meaning couldn't be expressed clearly, and almost each sentence has serious mistakes.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

From the analysis of Thematic structure and Thematic progression modes of three compositions in College English Test-6 (CET6), the first composition combines the simple, multiple and clause Theme into the discourse to name the topic or enrich the content attracting the readers, and designs four kinds of thematic progression modes to promote the development of the plot, signify the clear-cut vein and demonstrate the cohesion of the text; The second composition presents more multiple themes than the simple themes and less clause themes that increases the difficulty of expression, understanding and communication and is kindly lack of the semantics coherence, and uses three kinds of thematic progression patterns superficially without deeply constructing the structure and connecting the meaning that makes the structure of most parts imprecise and inadequacy; The third composition with chaotic content and unclear logic only adopts simple and multiple themes showing the character of single form, serious lack of logic, and uses three thematic progression patterns in a very small numbers leading the whole structure in a mess. On the whole, it signifies that the repeated articulation of the

Theme-Rheme theory is one of the important means to achieve cohesion and coherence of discourse (Hu, 1994). Meanwhile, Theme-Rheme theory has the strong feasibility, maneuverability, practicability and applicability in College English writing. Applying the Theme-Rheme theory in English teaching, students are capable of capturing the main topic firstly, tracing the logical thinking, recognizing the organized structure and realizing the cohesion and coherence. What's more, English teacher should both instruct the explicit and the implicit cohesive means for improving student's level of English writing, applying the Theme-Rheme theory in English lesson in terms of practicability rather than the superficial theory. Actually, it not only sheds light on the English teaching but also on all the industries related to writing.

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