Discourse Functions of Marked Theme and the Narrative Nature of Chinese EFL Learners' Argumentative Writing

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Abstract

Marked Theme in Systemic Functional Grammar plays an important role in writing genre differentiation. This research analyzes 13 samples of model writing from IELTS preparation books and 100 samples of argumentative writing by Chinese EFL learners based on a modification of discourse functions of marked Theme from previous research. The analysis shows different functions of marked Theme in IELTS model writing and Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing. Marked Themes in IELTS model writing usually indicate a real/possible condition, location in time of real-world entity, hypothetical condition, and purpose to support main arguments, offer background knowledge, orient readers to possibilities and solutions, which indicates an argumentative nature of the model writing. In contrast, Chinese EFL learners tend to orient readers to the message by marked Theme showing location in time of real-world entity and real/possible condition. Their frequent use of location in time often grounds themselves to purely tell a fact, an event or an experience. However, such facts, events, and experiences usually fail to serve as supportive evidence for their arguments. They also fail to give a fact or a possible result after the Theme of real/possible condition as in the model writing. Chinese EFL learners' use of marked Theme indicates a narrative nature of their argumentative writing. Based on such research results, teachers are recommended to raise their students' awareness of the functions of marked Theme and give instructions on how marked Theme can be used to strengthen ideas in argumentative writing and make a piece of writing more argumentative.

Keywords: *Argumentative writing, Chinese EFL learners, discourse functions, marked theme, systemic functional grammar*

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1. Introduction

The theory of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) attaches great importance to the notion of Theme. Theme, with the first letter always capitalized to represent the name of a function in SFG, is the departure point of a message (Halliday, 1985). It starts from the very beginning of a sentence and ends at the first experiential element, either participant, circumstance or process. The remaining part of a message is Rheme. Theme not only grounds a writer's ideas into a language (Martínez-Prieto, 2014) but also orients readers of a text to what is being talked about and thus sets expectations for the Rheme in them. Theme as subject is unmarked while Theme as other than subject is marked. In principle, marked Theme is only chosen when there is a good reason to front such non-subject information such as to emphasize meaning, to create textual link or to signal changes and turns in real-world and discourse (Gosden, 1992).

Marked Theme is an important notion because it has potential in differentiating writing genres. Gosden's research (1992) on the marked Theme in different parts of scientific research articles shows diverse distributions of marked Theme in terms of discourse function. For example, the experimental section, which is usually a narration of experimental procedures, is overwhelmed with marked Theme expressing location in time of real-world entity; while the discussion section, which is more of argumentative nature, employs marked Themes indicating contrastive/concession the most. Another research also indicates that markedness of Theme helps indicate writing genre. Al Bakaa's research (2015) explored the expression of critical thinking and self-voice in arguments by native English writers and non-native English writers through an analysis of unmarked and marked Theme. It found that non-native English writers produce more descriptive and less argumentative writing due to their less frequent use of marked Theme. In contrast, native English writers' more frequent use of marked Theme help to create more argumentative writing. Therefore, marked Theme plays a role in distinguishing writing genre.

1282

However, it is rather rare to find such research on how Theme indicates problems in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' argumentative writing in terms of writing genre because most of the previous studies have been devoted to how Theme contributes to other aspects of EFL learners' writing, such as cohesion and coherence (Green, Christopher, and Mei, 2000). Mindful of this research gap, this study aims to expose such writing genre problems by examining 100 Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing samples through the lens of marked Theme in comparison with 13 model argumentative writing samples from IELTS preparation books.

Argumentative writing is an important but challenging writing type for EFL learners. In academic contexts, EFL learners at university level are expected to make argumentations in essays, either in a final term paper or in standard language proficiency tests, such as College English Test (CET) – the largest national English language proficiency test in China (Zhai and Li, 2017) and the two most famous international English language proficiency tests – the International English Language Test System (IELTS) and TOEFL iBT® Test. Argumentative writing is challenging for Chinese EFL learners because such type of writing not only requires them to be logical in reasoning but also skillful in using a foreign language. Therefore, it is valuable to looking into argumentative writing by Chinese EFL learners to offer insights on how their argumentative writing can be improved.

2. Objectives

This study is an attempt to expose problems of writing genre in Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing through the lens of marked Theme in comparison to model argumentative writing from IELTS preparation books. Four objectives will be pursued in this study.

1. To explore discourse functions of marked Theme in IELTS model writing.

2. To explore discourse functions of marked Theme in Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing.

3. To compare discourse functions of marked Theme in Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing and those of IELTS model writing.

4. To explore how different usages of marked Theme, if any, indicate problems of Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing in terms of writing genre.

3. Materials and Methods

One hundred argumentative writing samples were randomly collected from the Ten-thousand English Composition of Chinese Learners (the TECCL corpus) (Version 1.1) (Xu, 2015) with a criterion of no less than 150 words. Another 13 model argumentative writing samples were collected from IELTS preparation books (Cambridge, 2012) for the purpose of comparison. Among the 13 IELTS model writing samples, 12 are prepared by IELTS examiners as model writings to Writing Task 2 and one is Band 8 writing by a test taker, which are considered as examples of good writing in this study.

T-unit is taken as the unit of analysis in this study. A T-unit is one independent clause together with all of its dependent clauses (Hunt, 1965). One T-unit contains one Theme and one Rheme. It is taken as the unit of analysis for the reason that any unit smaller than T-unit will result in segments (Hunt, 1965).

The analysis of learner writing and model writing in this study is based on a modification of the discourse functions of marked Theme from Gosden's work (1992). Thirteen discourse functions of marked Theme from Gosden's work (1992) and a fourteenth one added by the author serve as a framework for analysis in this study. Examples of the 14 discourse functions taken from the data sets in this study are given below for illustration. Theme-Rheme boundary is marked by "//" and marked Theme is bolded and italicized for easier reading purpose.

(1) Location in time – real world entity (RWE)

Today // the ways we consider human psychology and mental development is heavily influenced by the genetic science (Cambridge, 2012).

(2) Location in space – real world entity (RWE)

At school, // children will experience working and living with people from a whole variety of background from the wider society (Cambridge, 2012).

(3) Location in space – discourse entity (DE)

In the final analysis, // making money is at the top of everything (Xu, 2015).

(4) Addition – emphatic

Just like movie stars, // they live extravagant lifestyles with huge houses and cars (Cambridge, 2012).

(5) Contrastive/concession

…*and unlike adolescents*, // they are not inhibited by self-consciousness (Cambridge, 2012).

However, *even though it is unlikely that all workers do feel happy in their work*, // I think it is not unrealistic to promote more job satisfaction in any job (Cambridge, 2012).

(6) Cause – reason/result

and *because of this* // job satisfaction is indeed very important for the wellbeing of that person (Cambridge, 2012).

As a result of constant media attention, // sports professional in my country have become stars and celebrities, … (Cambridge, 2012)

(7) Cause – purpose

… but *to be really good in areas such as music, art or sport*, // then some natural talent is required (Cambridge, 2012).

(8) Means

… and *by doing voluntary work*, // students can learn how to communicate with others and work in a team but also how to manage their time and improve their organizational skills (Cambridge, 2012).

(9) Condition – real/possible

In some cases // an employee is working in a job that suits neither their skills nor their personality (Cambridge, 2012).

Once a child goes to school, // they are entering a wider community where teachers and peers will have just as much influence as their parents do at home (Cambridge, 2012).

(10) Condition – hypothetical

Without the natural talent, // continuous training would be neither attractive nor productive, … (Cambridge, 2012)

(11) Validation – external

Traditionally, // children have begun studying foreign languages at secondary school, … (Cambridge, 2012)

(12) Validation – internal

From the above analysis, // academic dishonesty on campus is extremely harmful to the students (Xu, 2015).

(13) Viewpoint

To some extent // the question depends on the age of the child (Cambridge, 2012).

(14) Introduction to a new referent/recall of a remoted referent

But, *as with all questions of nature versus nurture*, // they are not mutually exclusive (Cambridge, 2012).

These 14 discourse function categories of marked Theme play the role of an analytical framework for this study. Some discourse functions in Gosden's work (1992) such as "location in time – discourse entity" and "addition – appositive" are not applicable in the current study for the reason that such elements in the theme position are considered as textual Theme, rather than marked topical Theme. For example, "Firstly" in (15) indicates a location in time in the discourse, but is considered as textual Theme, rather than a marked Theme. Also, "For example" in (16) indicate appositive addition but is considered as textual Theme in the current study, not a marked Theme.

(15) Location in time – discourse entity

Firstly, a person // needs to feel that they are doing valued and valuable work, … (Cambridge, 2012)

 (16) Addition – appositive

For example, *if sufficient sky trains and underground train systems were built and effectively maintained in our major cities*, // then traffic on the roads would be dramatically reduced (Cambridge, 2012).

The fourteenth category is summarized from the marked Theme that does not fall into any category from Gosden's research (1992). It is necessary to add this category because quite a number of such marked Theme are found in the data sets, especially in the learners' writing samples.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1 Marked Theme in the Data

	Model Writing	Learner Writing
Numbers of Samples	13	100
Number of T-units	187	1767
Number of Marked Theme	42	452
Proportion of Marked Theme	22.46%	25.58%

Table 1 is a summary of the general information of marked Theme in the data of this study. As Table 1 shows, Chinese EFL learners are able to employ a similar proportion of marked Theme in their argumentative writing (25.58%) to the IELTS model writing (22.46%). However, the proportion of marked Theme is too general to judge if EFL learners employ marked Theme in a proper way. Therefore, a closer examination of discourse functions of marked Theme is conducted based on the framework introduced in the earlier section. The next three sections are the results, discussions, and comparisons of the functional analysis of marked Theme in IELTS model writings and Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing.

4.1 Discourse Functions of Marked Theme in IELTS Model Writing

Twelve discourse functions of marked Theme are identified in the IELTS model writing samples, as presented in Table 2. Four discourse functions, namely condition – real, cause – purpose, condition – hypothetical and location of time – real-world entity, are found to be the main discourse functions of marked Theme in the model writing, which accounts for more than 60% of the marked Theme (61.91%).

The model writing emphasizes real/possible conditions in its Theme position the most. What follows such marked Theme is often a fact or a possible result under the condition that can serve as evidence to support the main arguments, as can been seen from examples A and B.

A. However, learning to understand and share the value system of a whole society cannot be achieved just in the home [main argument]. *Once a child goes to school*, // they are entering a wider community where teachers and peers will have just as much influence as their parents do at home (Cambridge, 2012).

B. … (spare time charity activities) could also possibly reduce the crime level in the high school age group [main argument]. *If students have activities to do*, // they will not be bored and come up with silly ideas which can be dangerous for them or their surroundings (Cambridge, 2012).

Table 2 Discourse Functions of Marked Theme in IELTS Model Writing

Functions	Frequency	Proportion
Condition – real/possible	10	23.81%
Location in time – RWE	6	14.29%
Condition – hypothetical	5	11.90%
Cause – purpose	5	11.90%
Contrastive/concession	3	7.14%
Cause – reason/result	3	7.14%
Means	3	7.14%
Addition – emphatic	2	4.76%
Validation – external	2	4.76%
Location in space – RWE	1	2.38%
Viewpoint	1	2.38%
Introduction to a new referent/recall of a remoted referent	1	2.38%
Total	42	100%

Location in time – real-world entity ranks second place in terms of frequency (14.29%). A close examination of those examples found that the employment of marked Theme to express location in time of real-world entity often occurs at the very beginning of the model writing to provide background knowledge of an argument, as example C and D illustrate.

C. ***Over the last half century*** // the pace of change in the life of human beings has increased beyond our wildest expectations (Cambridge, 2012).

D. ***Nowadays*** // many adults have full-time jobs (Cambridge, 2012).

In the case where marked Theme expressing location in time of real-world entity does not occur at the beginning of a piece of writing to provide background information, what follows is often the author's opinion or argument, as illustrated by examples F and G.

F. ***Sooner or later*** // they will find that the familiar jobs no longer exist, or that the 'safe' patterns of behavior are no longer appropriate (Cambridge, 2012).

G. ***After that***, // if sanctions are needed, the punishment should not be of a physical nature, as that merely sends the message that it is acceptable for larger people to hit smaller ones-an outcome which may well result in the child starting to bully others (Cambridge, 2012).

The high frequency of marked Theme functioning as a hypothetical condition (11.90%) indicates that a skillful argumentative writer reasons through making a hypothesis and expressing possibilities to make arguments. Such a way of reasoning is argumentative because a writer needs to make a judgment on the possibility. The following examples from the model samples help to illustrate this point.

H. ***If this were not true***, // then we would be able to predict the behavior and character of a person from the moment they were born (Cambridge, 2012).

I. For example, ***if sufficient sky trains and underground train systems were built and effectively maintained in our major cities***, // then traffic on the roads would be dramatically reduced (Cambridge, 2012).

The high frequency of marked Theme functioning as a cause – purpose (11.90%) indicates another way of reasoning in the model argumentative writing, that is, reasoning through problem-solving. Model writing samples make arguments by offering a solution to a problem. The following examples illustrate reasoning through problem-solving.

J. ***In order to be a good member of any society*** // the individual must respect and obey the rules of their community and share their values (Cambridge, 2012).

K. ***To help a child learn the difference between right and wrong***, // teachers and parents should firstly provide good role modelling in their own behavior (Cambridge, 2012).

Marked Theme expressing real/possible condition, location in time of real-world entity, hypothetical condition and purpose represent four main functions of marked Theme in the IELTS model argumentative writing. The real/possible condition is often used to provide evidence to support the main

arguments. Location in time of real-world in the Theme position is usually used to offer background information at the very beginning of the writing. The hypothetical condition in the Theme position orients readers to possibilities of an event under an unreal condition. Expressions of purpose in the Theme orients readers to a solution to a problem. These four main discourse function categories of marked Theme contribute to the argumentative nature of the model writing.

4.2 Discourse Functions of Marked Theme in Chinese EFL Learners' Argumentative Writing

Discourse functions of marked Theme in Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing are presented in Table 3. Table 3 shows two main discourse function categories of marked Theme in argumentative writing by Chinese EFL learners, namely location in time – real-world entity and condition – real/possible. These two categories represent more than half of the marked Theme (55.09%) in their writing.

Chinese EFL learners select marked Theme to express location in time of real-world entity the most (29.65%). Similar to the model writing, Chinese EFL learners' writing also employs marked Theme of this discourse function category at the very beginning of their argumentative writing to provide general background information of their argument. However, only a very small number of such marked Themes, 28 out of 134 (20.90%), are used in this way.

Different from the model writing, Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing employs marked Theme expressing location in time of real-world entity to tell a fact, an event or an experience, which often fails to function as evidence to support the main arguments as it is often not relevant to the main argument. Examples from their writing are presented below to illustrate this point.

L. With the development of the economy, great changes have taken place in Chinese family life in the past thirty years [main argument]… ***In their childhood***, // life was so tough that they even couldn't have enough food (Xu, 2015).

M. …working results in little time for studying [main argument]… ***When I was a freshman***, // I took a part-time job out of the desire to increase my pocket money (Xu, 2015).

N. In human history, the death penalty has a very close relationship with development [main argument]. ***In the ancient days***, // the rulers apply the penalty to keep the society stable (Xu, 2015).

Table 3 Discourse Functions of Marked Theme in Chinese EFL Learners' Argumentative Writing

Functions	Frequency	Proportion
Location in time – RWE	134	29.65%
Condition – real/possible	115	25.44%
Validation – external	38	8.41%
Contrastive/concession	29	6.42%
Introduction to a new referent/recall of a remoted referent	29	6.42%
Cause – reason/result	29	6.42%
Location in space – RWE	22	4.87%
Cause – purpose	17	3.76%
Validation – internal	12	2.65%
Means	11	2.43%
Addition – emphatic	6	1.33%
Others	5	1.11%
Condition – hypothetical	3	0.66%
Location in space – DE	2	0.44%
Total	452	100%

Chinese EFL learners orient their readers to a fact, an event or an experience in the past by employing marked Theme indicating a location in real-world time. Such employment of marked Theme indicates a narrative nature of their argumentative writing as they tend to purely describe or present what happened in the past, but fail to give their own opinion or to support their argument. Such a narrative nature makes their writing less argumentative.

The second main functions of marked Theme in Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing is condition – real/possible (25.44%). The frequent use of real/possible condition in the Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing also indicates a narrative nature of their writing. A very small proportion of marked Themes expressing real/possible condition, 10 out of 115 (8.77%), are used at the very beginning of writing to provide background information such as example O and P.

O. *With the development of our country*, // the way of our life changes a lot (Xu, 2015).

P. *With the development of technology*, // the human beings are stepping into the information society (Xu, 2015).

More than 90% of the marked Theme expressing real/possible condition occur in the place where supportive details of the main argument are supposed to be. However, T-units with such marked Theme often fail to function as evidence to support main arguments due to their failure to put relevant truths, facts or possible results in the Rheme position as writers of the model writing do.

Instead, Chinese EFL learners tend to repeat what has been said before or point out what should be done under the real/possible condition in the Rheme position after such marked Theme as real/possible condition. Such T-units are often a pure description of an action rather than an argument or supportive details. Examples are listed below as an illustration of this point.

Q. Friendship is an eternal theme in human history [main argument]. *With success achieved*, // we also need friends to share our joys (Xu, 2015).

R. (Domestic violence and abuse) is often overlooked, excused, or denied [main argument]… *If you recognize yourself or someone you know in the following warning signs and descriptions of abuse*, // reach out (Xu, 2015).

S. Money is considered by some people as the most important thing in their life [main argument]… *If I have enough money*, // I should use my money in doing something good (Xu, 2015).

Chinese EFL learners' frequent use of marked Theme expressing location in time of real-world entity and real/possible condition show a narrative nature of their argumentative writing. Their use of location in time of real-world entity in the Theme position usually grounds them to purely describe a fact, an event or an experience in the past but such facts, events and experiences usually fail to support their main argument. Their reliance on real/possible condition does not help to strengthen their argument due to their failure to put relevant truths, facts or possible results in the Rheme position to support the arguments as writers of the model writing do.

4.3 A Comparison of Discourse Functions of Marked Theme in IELTS Model Writing and Chinese EFL Learners Argumentative Writing

As Gosden (1992) asserts, marked Theme is only chosen to emphasize certain information when there is a good reason to front such information. In all the case of marked Theme, writers of IELTS model writing are more flexible in emphasizing different information for various purposes as have been discussed in detail in section 4.1. As Table 4 shows, marked Theme in IELTS model writing ais mainly employed to emphasize real/possible conditions (23.81%), location in time of real-world entity (14.29%), hypothetical condition (11.90%) and purpose (11.90%). These four discourse functions account for over 60% of the marked Theme in IELTS model writing and indicate that IELTS model writing emphasizes various information in the Theme position.

Table 4 A Comparison of the Use of Main Discourse Functions of Marked Theme in IELTS Model Writing and Chinese EFL Learners' Argumentative Writing and the Indications of Writing Genre

Data Sets	IELTS Model Writing	Chinese EFL Learners' Argumentative Writing
Main Discourse Functions of Marked Theme	1. Condition – real/possible (23.81%): used to tell a fact or a possible result under the condition that can serve as an evidence to support the main arguments. 2. Location in time – RWE (14.29%): used at the very beginning of the writing to equip readers with background knowledge of an argument; or followed by the author's opinion, or argument 3. Condition – hypothetical (11.90%) 4. Cause – purpose (11.90%)	1. Location in time – RWE (29.65%): usually used to tell a fact, an event or an experience, which often fails to function as evidence to support the main arguments as it is often not relevant to the main argument 2. Condition – real/possible (25.44%): typically followed by what should be done under the real/possible condition, but often fails to serve as supportive details for the main arguments
Indication of Writing Genre	More argumentative	Less argumentative and more narrative

In contrast, information emphasized in the Theme position by Chinese EFL learners are very limited in type. Chinese EFL learners have heavily emphasized location in time of real-world entity (29.65%) and real/possible condition (25.44%), which account for more than 50% of the marked Theme in their writing.

Real/possible condition and location in time of real-world entity rank top two in both data sets but in different orders. Despite the same ranking as the top two discourse functions, specific usages of these two discourse functions in the two data sets are rather different. As have been discussed in detail in section 4.1, IELTS model writing employs real/possible conditions to orient readers to a fact or a possible result under the condition that can serve as evidence to support the main arguments. Location in time of real-world entity, ranked the second place in IELTS model writing, is often emphasized in the Theme position at the very beginning of the writing to equip readers with background knowledge of an argument, or followed by the author's opinion, or argument. However, location in time of real-world entity, ranking the first place in Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing, is usually used to tell a fact, an event or an experience, which often fails to function as evidence to support the main arguments as it is often not relevant to the main argument, as discussed in section 4.2. Unlike those in IELTS model writing, real/possible conditions in Chinese EFL learners argumentative writing are typically used to point out what should be done under the real/possible condition in the Rheme position which often fails to serve as supportive details for the main arguments.

Main discourse functions of marked Theme in IELTS model writing shows an argumentative nature of the writing, while the main discourse functions marked Theme in Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing shows a less argumentative, but more narrative nature of their writing. The frequent employment of real/possible condition, hypothetical condition, and purpose in Theme position indicates the expression of standpoints, judgments, reasoning through hypothesis and problem-solving. These represent the characteristics of argumentative writing. On the contrary, Chinese EFL learners' writing is less argumentative writing but more narrative due to their reply on marked Theme indicating a location in time of real-world entity and real/possible condition. Similar to the findings in Godsden's research (1992), the overwhelming employment of location in time of real-world entity suggests a more narrative nature of a piece of writing. Chinese EFL learners often fail to give their viewpoints but just state a fact or an experience, or a command of what should be done under a real/possible condition without telling the reason why that should be done. Statement of facts and experiences are less argumentative but more narrative.

5. Conclusion

Chinese EFL learners are able to employ marked Theme in their argumentative writing in similar proportion to the writers of the IELTS model writing. However, a detailed examination of the discourse functions of marked Theme in the IELTS model writing and Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing exposes significant differences in their use of marked Theme.

IELTS model writings employ real/possible condition in the Theme position the most as supportive evidence of their argument. Locations in time of real-world entity are used at the very beginning of writing to provide general background knowledge of the topic or in the middle of the writing to express the author's opinion. Writers of IELTS model writing reason through making a hypothesis and orients their readers to the possibility of an event under the unreal condition, which is rather argumentative. They also put information expressing a purpose in the Theme position to orient their readers to a solution to a problem. These three main functions of marked Theme show an argumentative nature of the IELTS model writing.

In contrast, Chinese EFL learners use location in time of real-world entity the most to tell a fact, an event or an experience in the past. They also employ a large number of a real/possible condition in the Theme position. Unlike the case in model writing, Chinese EFL learners fail to give a relevant fact or a possible result in the Rheme position to support their arguments. Their employment of marked Theme indicates a narrative nature of their argumentative writing as the overwhelming use of location in time of real-world entity in their Theme position is similar to what has been found in the section with a narrative nature – the experimental section of research articles in Gosden's research (1992).

Based on the research finding of a narrative nature of Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing reflected by their use of marked Theme, English language teachers of Chinese EFL learners are recommended to raise Chinese EFL learners' awareness of the discourse functions of marked Theme and give instructions on how marked Theme can be used to strengthen ideas in argumentative writing and make a writing more argumentative.

6. Acknowledgements

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