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The contribution of Halliday to EAP writing instruction: a personal journey

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Abstract

Halliday’s work on the texture of texts and thematic structure is fundamental in enabling EAP students to follow the advice often given by lecturers to ‘write clearly and logically’. An understanding of thematic structure can equip students with the tools to construct paragraphs that communicate their own ideas in ways that are easy to read. This approach takes students beyond topic sentences and discourse markers to a more nuanced presentation of their arguments. In this researching EAP practice paper, I will trace the coverage of Theme and thematic structure in the research literature, in handbooks for teachers and in coursebooks for students, which influenced my own use of these concepts. I will show how these concepts were incorporated into teaching materials to help EAP students write effective paragraphs.

Keywords: Theme; thematic structure; paragraph writing; low proficiency learners
The contribution of Halliday to EAP writing instruction: a personal journey

Teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) involves “teaching English specifically to facilitate learners’ study or research through the medium of English” (Hamp-Lyons, 2011, p. 89). EAP focuses on “the texts (spoken and written) that occur in academic contexts” (Bruce, 2011, p. 6). The aim is to help students to analyse texts from their chosen disciplines so that they understand the content and can engage with it in order to display their understanding or contribute new ideas to an academic community. The ability to deconstruct academic texts and use them for new purposes requires a focus on discourse beyond sentence level. Michael Halliday’s work on the texture of texts, including thematic structure, has been fundamental in enabling me to interpret the advice often given by lecturers to “write clearly and logically” and to help EAP students to follow this advice. Raising students’ awareness of thematic structure – in contrast to traditional approaches to paragraph writing – can equip them with the tools to construct paragraphs that communicate their own ideas in ways that are easy to read. This approach takes students beyond topic sentences and discourse markers to a more nuanced presentation of their arguments.

Advice on writing paragraphs has been available since at least the mid-19th century when Alexander Bain defined a paragraph as “a collection of sentences with unity of purpose” (1866 cited in D’Angelo, 1986, p. 432 and in Duncan, 2007, p. 474) and a prescriptive approach to teaching paragraph structure emerged. Students were advised to begin by writing a topic sentence, which contained the main idea, followed by a series of sentences developing that idea into a unified and coherent unit, usually through methods of reasoning such as comparison, contrast, cause and effect (D’Angelo, 1986). This simplistic approach might be a useful starting point to enable student writers to make their writing more readable (ibid) but it has been transferred uncritically from one coursebook to the next (Duncan, 2007). Students are also encouraged to make liberal use of discourse markers (However, On the contrary), which may not accurately signal the meaning
relations between sentences. In a comprehensive review of the historical development of paragraph theory, Duncan (2007) called for renewed research to provide composition teachers with new insights from descriptive, functional and cognitive approaches and better teaching materials. He suggested that teachers need to be able to describe “how overlapping, nested structures can work together to power effective essays” (p. 489). He also called for more attention to “flow” or “rhythm” to explain to readers “the temporal movement of ideas at the paragraph and macrostructure levels” (p. 489).

A considerable body of theory and research exists in Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004), which provides the insights Duncan called for. In Systemic Functional Grammar, language is viewed as a complex system of interconnected layers of meaning, with components whose selection is determined by the interaction between speaker and listener or writer and reader in a particular situation. Texts are viewed as dynamic structures through which meanings flow in waves of abstraction “with smaller units of discourse ‘scaffolded’ within larger units” (Martin & Rose, 2007, p. 199). The key to understanding these patterns in texts is the concept of Theme. Although this is not precisely Halliday’s definition, Theme can be defined as the first element in a clause up to and including the grammatical subject (Gosden, 1998; Hawes & Thomas, 2012; Forey & Sampson, 2017), with the remainder of the sentence labelled Rheme. Multiple themes may also include elements which show the writer’s viewpoint (clearly, significantly) and discourse markers which show relationships between ideas (however, as a result). Theme provides a framework within which Rheme can be interpreted (Fries, 1995; Forey & Sampson, 2017). Typically, Theme contains given information recoverable from the text or context while Rheme contains the news or point of the message. The development of a text is managed through nested layers of themes in sentences, hyper-themes in paragraphs and macro-themes in whole texts (Lautamatti, 1986, in Péry-Woodley, 1991; Fries, 1995; Martin & Rose, 2007). This thematic structure creates what Halliday and Hasan (1976) refer to as “texture”, i.e. coherence and cohesion, in texts. Systemic Functional Grammar is
the description of language that has underpinned literacy programmes for primary and secondary school children in Australia since 1979 (Rose & Martin, 2012) but has only relatively recently become more widely known outside Australia. Duncan does not refer to it in his review and it has not generally been taken up by coursebook writers in the UK and USA, although explanations of Theme/rheme and given/new appear in handbooks for language teachers published in the UK (McCarthy, 1991; McCarter, 1997; Hewings & Hewings 2005; Alexander, Argent & Spencer, 2019).

In this Researching EAP practice paper, I will trace the coverage of Theme and thematic structure in the research literature, in handbooks for teachers and in coursebooks for students, which influenced my own use of these concepts. I will show how these concepts were incorporated into teaching materials to help EAP students write effective paragraphs.

**Definitions of Theme and thematic structure with suggestions for teaching**

Systemic functional Linguistics (SFL) “is oriented [...] to developing an elaborate model in which language, life, the universe and everything can be viewed in communicative (i.e. semiotic) terms” (Halliday & Martin, 1993, p. 23). This commitment to such a comprehensive description of the language system, for the purposes of analysis and research, is perhaps one of the reasons why SFL has proved somewhat difficult to put into practice in language classrooms. Burns and Knox (2005) observed teachers who had completed an MA and concluded that “it cannot be assumed that teaching Masters courses in SFL will lead to teachers using it in their classrooms” (p. 257). The teachers they observed struggled to understand the SFL description of grammar and integrate it into their existing grammar teaching in ways which their students found acceptable and which were also compatible with prescribed coursebooks and syllabuses. What follows is an attempt to outline the concepts of Systemic Functional Grammar, specifically those aspects related to thematic structuring at paragraph level, in simplified terms that can be understood and put into practice by a teacher who is unfamiliar with the theory or a student who does not need to get to grips with the
metalanguage. This will not be a framework for complex, retrospective analysis but an illustrated guide to writing with the needs of a reader in mind.

The SFL model comprises several layers, each with sets of options (systems), which link social behaviour to language (Melrose, 1995). The social setting (referred to as the context of situation) describes potential behaviour, what the speaker/writer can do using language. The semantic system describes what the speaker/writer can mean in terms of language functions. The lexicogrammatical system sets out the available language choices. The context of situation, in which people have the potential to negotiate meaning through language, is divided into three dimensions, which change in systematic ways with changes in the situation, the people involved or how they are using language. Melrose (1995, interpreting Halliday, 1978, *Language as Social Semiotic*) provides the following definitions. The three dimensions of the context of situation are referred to as *field*, the topic of discussion or what is happening; *tenor*, the relation between the people involved; and *mode*, the role that language is playing. The potential semantic meanings that speakers or writers can express in the social setting can be broadly captured through three metafunctions, which map onto the dimensions of the social setting: experiential (the ideas being communicated, relating to field), interpersonal (the relationships being established, relating to tenor) and textual (the discourse unfolding, relating to mode). The dimensions in the social setting (context of situation) and the metafunctions in the semantic system are in turn realised by a number of systems (options) at the lexicogrammatical level (Melrose, 1995). Forey and Sampson (2017, quoting Halliday, 1978) point out that the textual metafunction is key to enabling the other two: spoken or written texts help speakers or writers to communicate ideas and build relationships. The key points, as I interpret them for the purposes of this paper, are that at each level there are choices for writers/speakers to make within the resources for interacting in social settings to negotiate meaning using language. Once a choice is made, this constrains other possible choices. Understanding the context of situation is crucial because a change in the social setting changes the way language is used. The systems I will
focus on are Theme and thematic structure at paragraph level, which relate to the textual metafunction and enable writers to create “texture” (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 324) in order to help their readers (and listeners) to understand their intended meaning.

Texture is created by three main systems at word/phrase, sentence and paragraph level. At the word/phrase level cohesive ties, such as conjunctions or discourse markers, link stretches of text with what has gone before. Theme systems – “the organisation of the sentence and its parts in a way which relates it to its environment” (ibid p. 324) – operate within sentences; and information systems – “the organisation of the text into units of information” (ibid p. 325) – operate between sentences in paragraphs. These concepts are explained in simplified form in a handbook for teachers (Alexander, Argent & Spencer, 2019):

The term Theme is used to name the first element in a clause or sentence. This element is important because it is “the point of departure” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, pp. 64ff and 579ff), which orients readers to the message they are about to receive. Theme is developed within Rheme, which is the remainder of the sentence. Rheme is the point of the message and shows where it is heading. In simple one-clause sentences Theme is normally the subject and Rheme the predicate.

These concepts can be made accessible to students in stages beginning with pairs of simple sentences as follows:

1. **Time** flies like an arrow.
2. **Fruit** flies like a banana. (Pinker, 1994, p. 209).

In sentences 1 and 2, students can be guided to notice that the form of a word (flies/like) does not indicate its grammatical label (noun/verb) or its function in the sentence (subject/adverbial). In sentences 3 and 4 they notice that moving elements to the subject position changes the meaning.

3. **The teacher** destroyed the mobile phone.
4. **The mobile phone** destroyed the teacher.
The next stage introduces a pair of simple constructed paragraphs such as the following, in which students decide the topic of each paragraph (staff duties in the first paragraph but clients in the second paragraph) and are guided to notice that sentences 3 and 4 in each paragraph contain the same ideas but in a different order to suit the two different topics.

1. At Bettaworld we value efficiency in our workforce. We are very clear about the duties of each member of staff. The sales assistant deals with enquiries over the phone. The manager contacts clients personally. This ensures that there is no duplication of effort.

2. At Bettaworld we value our clients. They make our business a success. Their enquiries are dealt with immediately by the sales assistant. Some clients are contacted personally by the manager. This ensures that they continue to do business with Bettaworld.

These simple examples can be used to show students that Theme refers to a position in the sentence which is independent of grammatical function (subject/adverbial) or form (noun/adverb) and functions like a container into which information can be moved to suit the logical development of texts. Theme typically answers the question: what are we talking about. Rheme answers the question: what are we saying about it. For students with lower English language proficiency, these examples encourage them to notice the beginnings of their sentences and to see the choice of subject as purposeful, depending on the topic of their text. For teachers and higher proficiency students, more complex authentic academic texts can be used to show that, in addition to the grammatical subject, sentences may also start with discourse markers such as however, as a result (textual metafunction), or unfortunately, significantly (interpersonal metafunction), giving rise to multiple themes. Theme may also contain a summary of the circumstances within which the message develops, in the form of a subordinate clause or prepositional phrase. Themes that are not the grammatical subject are said to be marked because they are unusual in the developing discourse and create discontinuity, e.g. a shift to a new topic or setting in time (Martin & Rose, 2007; Forey & Sampson, 2017).
Thematic structure refers to choices a writer makes to place ideas in Theme or Rheme through a developing text in relation to the needs of a reader. Theme usually contains familiar or given information that the reader can be expected to know, while Rheme contains new information (Melrose, 1995; Forey & Sampson, 2017). Once new information has been presented, it can be summarised and represented as given in the following theme to create a logical development of ideas. Information contained in sentence themes informs the method of development of paragraphs (Fries, 1995) and genres (Martin & Rose, 2008), for example, historical recounts, where marked themes such as time clauses tend to be prominent, or recounts in scientific reports, where sequential discourse markers (first, then, finally) and conditional structures feature as themes (see Christie & Derewianka, 2008, and Martin & Rose, 2008, for a fuller account of the role of genre in motivating thematic patterning).

I first encountered the concepts of Theme/given and Rheme/new in a presentation by Joan Allwright at a BALEAP Professional Issues Meeting (1999), previously published in Allwright (1997). Allwright noted that these principles were rarely taught but, in her experience, “novice writers of academic papers […] find it extremely difficult to organise their ideas into coherent and cohesive texts that are reader-friendly” (p. 76). She designed an inductive task in which pairs of sentences are presented as possible choices for the continuing development of a text from its first sentence. Her aim was to provide a cognitive challenge for university level students (B2/C1 level on CEFR) in discovering the principles of information structure for themselves.

Allwright’s task formed the basis for the design of a similar task available as a photocopiable lesson in Alexander, Argent & Spencer (2019), in which each sentence from a first year undergraduate text, entitled Groups and group formation, is presented as a set of three possible choices for the placement of information. The first four sentences of this task are shown below with the original
choices made by the writer underlined. All choices are grammatically accurate but choosing any one of the alternatives below leads to a “bumpy” read as described by one student who completed the task. Students are instructed to focus on noun phrases containing the word group (the topic) to decide where in the sentence they should be placed. They can achieve this task without the need to process fully the complex grammar of sentences such as 2c or 4a.

1. The group is an important unit in the study of organisational behaviour.

2a. Studying groups is especially valuable when group dynamics are analysed.

2b. Analysing group dynamics is especially valuable for studying groups.

2c. What is especially valuable for studying groups is group dynamics.

3a. The social situation in which interactions and forces among group members occur is the concern of group dynamics.

3b. Group dynamics is concerned with the interactions and forces among group members in a social situation.

3c. The interactions and forces among group members in a social situation is the concern of group dynamics.

4a. The dynamics of members of formal or informal work groups and teams in an organisation are the focus when the concept of group dynamics is applied to the study of organisational behaviour.

4b. When the concept of group dynamics is applied to the study of organisational behaviour, the focus is on the dynamics of members of formal or informal work groups and teams in the organisation.

4c. The focus when the concept of group dynamics is applied to the study of organisational behaviour is on the dynamics of members of formal or informal work groups and teams in the organisation.
The strength of this task lies in the requirement for learners to make principled choices within the language system, which are dependent on the context (the developing text) and the goal (to facilitate reading). Allwright (1997) reported that her materials were well received and, in a personal communication (November, 2018), she commented that students wanted to know why no-one had taught them this before.

The logical development of the paragraph showing the placement of information in Theme and Rheme can be presented diagrammatically (after McCarthy, 1991) to show the flow of information from given to new:

- Theme 1 [the group] \(\rightarrow\) Rheme 1 [study of organisational behaviour]
- Theme 2 [studying groups] \(\rightarrow\) Rheme 2 [group dynamics]
- Theme 3 [group dynamics] \(\rightarrow\) Rheme 3 [interactions / members]
- Theme 3 [group dynamics] \(\rightarrow\) Rheme 4 [formal / informal groups]

The thematic development in sentences 2 and 3 is referred to as sequential progression (Lautamatti, 1986; Hewings & North, 2006; Wei, 2015), in which sub-topics (studying groups, group dynamics) arise from previous rhemes. The development in sentence 4 is labelled constant progression (Hewings & North, 2006; Wei, 2015), in which the topic from sentence 3 (group dynamics) is repeated in the following theme. This thematic patterning reflects the genre of the text (definition and explanation). The marked theme of sentence four contains a subordinate clause, which acts as a summary of all the information presented to the reader at that point and provides the circumstances within which the paragraph continues to develop.

Thematic development is managed by the construction of complex noun phrases, which summarise new information presented in previous sentences and label it as given. This shift from sentence to noun phrase condenses the information and results in a relation between grammar and meaning which Halliday refers to as grammatical metaphor because one grammatical class has been replaced...
A natural relation between grammar and meaning sees people, places and things as nouns, actions as verbs and logical relations as conjunctions. Martin (in Halliday & Martin, 1993, p. 221 ff) analyses processes of explanation, abstraction and classification in educational texts in history and science to show how actions are realised as nouns rather than verbs and logical relations are realised as verbs rather than conjunctions.

Martin (*ibid*) notes that grammatical metaphor is not simply “a resource for burying reasoning or defining terms but [...] a tool for organizing text” (p. 241) through the structures of Theme/rheme and given/new. Halliday (in Halliday & Martin, 1993, pp. 55-56) shows how noun phrase complexity and density builds across a developing text by analysing an article on the fracturing of glass. He shows how the concepts develop from simple declarative (natural) sentences at the beginning, *Glass cracks*, which are then summarised in phrases such as *the rate of* crack growth, occurring early in the article, and more densely packed *crack growth rate* occurring later. This way of signalling the development of ideas across texts means that noun phrases with the structure *the + noun + of + noun (or noun phrase)*, e.g. *the rate of crack growth*, are extremely common in academic and scientific writing (Sinclair, 1991; Flowerdew, 2003; Biber & Gray, 2010). Sinclair (1991) points to the difference in function between the two nouns: the first noun – referred to variously as a labelling, signalling, shell or general noun (Hunston & Francis, 1999; Flowerdew, 2003) – has a cohesive function. It summarises information already presented as new in a preceding rheme, labels it as given and possibly evaluates it in the following theme. The second noun or noun phrase anchors the complete phrase within the topic of the paragraph.

The concepts of Theme and thematic structure as defined in this way can be analysed in academic texts and presented to students as resources for writing. The following section reviews a selection of studies in which these concepts have been used to evaluate the practices of novice and expert writers and to design teaching materials.
Research on Theme and thematic structure to inform pedagogical practice

An early review (Péry-Woodley, 1991) brought together American composition research and SFL perspectives on Theme and information systems with the aim of elaborating a framework for the evaluation of student writing from a discourse perspective. Péry-Woodley reviewed the link between textual coherence and research on readability. An example is Lautamatti (1986, in Péry-Woodley 1991), who examined the way thematic progression changed when a text was simplified for language learners. She found that constant progression, in which topics are repeated in following themes, became more common when the text was simplified than sequential progression, in which sub-topics arise from previous rhemes. More recently, Hewings and North (2006) explored disciplinary differences in undergraduate student writing, using Theme as an indicator of rhetorical development. Disciplinary differences were apparent, even at undergraduate level. These authors highlighted the importance of understanding students’ previous experiences of academic writing to support their writing in new contexts.

Studies have analysed thematic selection and development in English essays written by Spanish students (Alonso-Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo, 1998) and in writing tasks produced for English exams by Chinese students (Wang, 2007; Wei, 2016). Contrastive analyses of thematisation in the writing of Chinese students compared to native English writers have been conducted by Green et al. (2000) and Hawes and Thomas (2012). These papers identified overuse of constant thematic progression in students’ texts with limited ability to handle sequential progression. Students introduced too many new themes with unclear or no connection to preceding rhemes and overused discourse markers in theme position. These findings are similar to those in a study of native English student writers by Witte (1983, reviewed in Péry-Woodley, 1991, p. 77). Each of these authors
advised teachers to use this kind of analysis when giving feedback to students in order to raise their awareness of discourse patterns beyond the level of clause.

Several studies have also evaluated pedagogical materials for teaching thematic progression. Gosden (1998) worked with Japanese doctoral students writing research articles for publication. He described a classroom procedure in which he reformulated sentences in student drafts into sets of “propositional clusters” (p. 20) with sentences reduced to notes in random order. Students then reconstructed their drafts, making decisions about the move structure of research article introductions and the placement of information in theme position. Lee (2002) outlined an instructional procedure, based on thematic structure, which she used to teach coherence in writing. It is noteworthy that these materials were more successful for students writing within their discipline, i.e. a context with which they identified. Gosden’s students were motivated to be working with their own authentic texts, whereas Lee’s students, taking a general communication skills class, did not expect an academic focus and found some lessons boring. Both authors thought that their interventions provided students with valuable resources for their writing and recommended that thematic selection and development should be taught within specific genres on a writing program.

Mellos (2011) used Systemic Functional Grammar to analyse the writing of ESL students on an undergraduate academic reading and writing course in an American university, comparing high and low scoring essays in terms of patterns of thematic development. In line with similar analyses (Witte, 1983, in Péry-Woodley, 1991, p. 77; Green et al., 2000; Hewings & North, 2006; Hawes & Thomas, 2012), she found contrasts between more and less proficient writers in terms of their ability to handle dense and complex noun phrases and a variety of thematic progression to establish connections across their texts. Less proficient writers used simple noun phrase subjects or pronouns and relied mainly on constant progression of repeating themes, thus failing to signal to their readers how their texts would unfold.
Despite recognition, in the literature, of the importance of Theme and thematic structure to the logical development of ideas in writing, few coursebooks have used these principles as the basis for their advice and activities on writing coherent paragraphs. The following section reviews some published materials where these ideas have been presented.

**Theme and thematic structure in published teaching materials**

The 1970s and 80s saw a move towards a communicative approach to language teaching (see Savignon, 2018; Melrose, 1995, for reviews of these developments in the United States and the United Kingdom respectively). As Melrose (1995) points out, the work of Michael Halliday was fundamental to understanding the role of language for communicating meaning in social settings. Rather than a system of rules and constraints on what can be said, the orientation of Systemic Functional Grammar is towards language as a system of choices for meaning making (Halliday & Martin, 1993, p. 22). However, the transition to a fully communicative form of language teaching was weighed down with assumptions from Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research at that time. It was assumed that a communicative orientation was only appropriate for higher level learners once they had studied a basic foundation of core grammatical structures (Johnson, 2009, p. 320). Specific varieties such as EAP were assumed to be too difficult without this basic grounding. In addition, low level learners, by analogy with children acquiring their first language, were thought to need plenty of exposure to spoken language in the classroom with writing used simply to reinforce grammar. These assumptions no longer fit with current thinking in SLA (Cook, 2009) and could even serve to infantilise low level EAP learners, underestimating their cognitive abilities (Alexander, 2012).

Thus, early coursebooks which included exercises on old (given) and new information were all aimed at upper intermediate and advanced level students (Johnson, 1981; Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 1987; Weissberg & Bunker, 1990). None of these coursebooks made reference to any linguistic theories.
drawn on for the materials. They tended to present thematic structure briefly and tangentially but did allude to its purpose: “provides the reader with a consistent starting point” (Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 1987, p. 157) and “lead readers smoothly through the ideas” (Weissberg & Buker, 1990, p. 25). More recently, De Chazal and McCarter (2012), targeting intermediate students (B2 on CEFR), refer to the use of the passive for maintaining focus on the essay topic, and to the presentation of new information at the end of a sentence, where it is easier to process. Bottomley (2015) introduces thematic structure for creating flow in academic writing for international students of science, and Caplan (2012) uses Systemic Functional Grammar principles to describe the language of advanced academic writing for graduate students, master’s and doctoral candidates. To date only Argent and Alexander (2010) presents a systematic development of Theme and thematic structure throughout a coursebook for lower proficiency EAP students (B1 on CEFR). The Appendix contains a sample of materials from this book and the next section provides a rationale for the design principles of the syllabus and tasks.

**Theme and thematic structure in EAP materials for learners with low language proficiency**

Argent and Alexander (2010) is based explicitly on Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) principles and aims to give low proficiency EAP learners an understanding of what is involved in studying at university by presenting case studies of three students taking their first steps to becoming participants in an international academic community. Part of the challenge in developing these materials was to respect the philosophy of SFL while at the same time presenting the concepts in simplified ways that students and their teachers could understand. We chose to use grammar terms which we could expect students at this level to be familiar with rather than introduce Systemic Functional Grammar terminology.

The context of situation is identified in the unit themes (i.e. topics), which reflect situations that students might encounter in their first weeks of study, such as Freshers’ week, First steps and new
routines, Finding information (in the library). These contexts determined the purposes that students would have for action and the functional language they would need to achieve their goals. The semantic system of language functions forms the underlying principle for syllabus design and maps onto the unit themes: describing shape, position and movement (Freshers’ week), instructions and processes (First steps and new routines), comparison, contrast and evaluation (Finding information). The variety of grammatical structures for realising these functions is deliberately limited so that learners can focus on acquiring key vocabulary for general academic purposes. The case study students come from three different disciplines (International Business, Computer Science, Environmental Science) to show that general functional grammar and vocabulary is transferrable across these disciplines.

Where authentic texts were simplified, the nominalised style and thematic structure of the original was maintained. There is an explicit focus on Theme and thematic structure using only metalanguage that students at this level can be expected to know, as shown in the following extract from the introduction to students:

- You will learn the important language patterns that are needed for understanding and producing academic texts. This means that you learn a lot about nouns and noun phrases rather than verbs. You will also learn how to write good texts by moving from general to specific and from what is familiar to what is new (p. 6).

The appendix (below) contains a selection of materials, grammar patterns and tasks drawn from this book. These are intended to show students that there are meaningful choices to make in the lexicogrammatical system for realising different purposes in academic contexts. Students are guided to notice particular language in texts, match this to grammar patterns and complete further examples using the pattern. Unit 3 presents the change in sentence starting points (themes) for different functions: giving instructions or describing processes. Unit 4 develops understanding of noun phrase structures and shows how a writer chooses shorter structures as a text develops. Unit 6
shows how the beginnings of sentences in a text carry a developing topic and that paraphrasing a text, e.g., by moving information into theme position, can change the topic of the text. Unit 8 presents textual patterns: general to specific and given to new with a task to choose appropriate sentences so the ideas in a paragraph link clearly from familiar to new. Unit 9 extends general to specific and given to new concepts in data commentary, which is presented as argument.

**Conclusion: reflection on the impact of the materials for low proficiency learners**

This coursebook was piloted and evaluated in Alexander (2012), where I argued that low proficiency learners could understand Theme and thematic structure if these were presented using familiar language. One of the teachers participating in the pilot commented on the students’ performance:

> ...they did pretty well with the familiar to new and general to specific and it really seemed to click with them... it was easier to sort of get through than I thought it would be.

I have found that once students become aware of the importance of Theme and thematic structure in creating a logical flow of ideas in text, they are able to read dense academic articles more easily and write paragraphs which present more nuanced arguments. They are grateful to be introduced to a writing style which more closely corresponds to the level of understanding they have achieved in their academic discipline. Students come to see activities, such as paraphrasing and using the passive construction, as meaningful choices to move ideas into theme position rather than simply variations in writing style. Problems relating to Theme in their texts – the overuse of constant thematic progression, too many new themes with unclear connection to preceding rhemes and overuse of discourse markers in theme position – can be highlighted in feedback, which they can understand. While the complexity of Systemic Functional Grammar is difficult to grasp, I have found the effort well worthwhile as it has allowed me to move away from simplistic approaches to teaching paragraph writing towards an approach more in line with the way writers actually construct texts.

**References**


Appendix
A selection of discovery tasks with accompanying grammar patterns showing how the concepts of Theme and thematic structure are presented within the functional syllabus.

1. **Unit 3  Sentence patterns**

   Simple sentences in English have two parts: a starting point and a comment to say something new. In instructions and process texts the sentences have different starting points and different verb forms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructions</th>
<th>Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Heat the solution</em></td>
<td><em>The solution is heated</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   **Starting point**
   - a verb
   - a noun phrase

   **Sentence pattern**
   - verb + noun phrase
   - noun phrase + verb

   **Verb form**
   - active *heat*
   - passive *is heated*

2. **Unit 4  Noun phrases**

   Task: underline the main verb in each sentence [of two texts]. Look left and underline the noun phrase that forms the subject.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun phrase pattern</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>noun + noun</td>
<td><em>lecture theatre, computer laboratory</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doing noun + noun</td>
<td><em>heating the mixture, washing the beans</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the + noun + of + noun + prepositional phrase</td>
<td><em>the use of computer-based methods for teaching</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   The third kind of noun phrase [above] is much longer than the other two. It has space for more ideas. It is often used when ideas are first introduced, to give more details. The other noun
phrases are shorter. They can be used to repeat ideas from the longer noun phrase later in the text. They give a summary of the ideas so they do not need to contain all the information.

*The use of computer-based methods for teaching*  \(\rightarrow\)  *computer-based teaching*

3. **Unit 6**  
**Paraphrasing to fit the topic**

Task: Two students discover they have the same lecturer for modules called *Developments in Information and Communications Technology (ICT)* and *Information and Communications Technology for Business*. Compare their essay titles and discuss how the topics are similar and different.

Software applications developed considerably in the last half of the 20th century. Outline some of these developments and explain their effect on business practices.

Business practices changed considerably in the last half of the 20th century. Outline some of the changes and relate these to new developments in software.

Task: Compare two introductions, which the students write together, and decide if it is acceptable practice at university for students to collaborate in this way.

   **Business practices have changed a great deal in the last 30 years and this is related to new developments in computers. Managers now produce their own reports, using word processors. Accountants prepare detailed financial information with a spreadsheet application. Everyone in a company can be contacted easily by email. In this essay I will outline these changes in detail and show that they have happened because of developments in computer software.**

   **Software applications have changed a great deal in the last 30 years and this has had a major impact on the world of business. Word processors are now used routinely by managers to produce their own reports. Spreadsheet applications are used by**
accountants to present detailed financial information. Email easily enables everyone in a company to contact each other. In this essay I will outline the development of software applications in detail and consider their impact on business practices.

Ideas can be moved to different places in a sentence to fit the topic. This often requires the verb forms to change between active and passive. It may also change statements of method and purpose.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>managers</th>
<th>produce</th>
<th>reports</th>
<th>using</th>
<th>word processors</th>
<th>method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reports</td>
<td>are produced</td>
<td>by managers</td>
<td>using</td>
<td>word processors</td>
<td>purpose</td>
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<tr>
<td>Word processors</td>
<td>are used</td>
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<td>purpose</td>
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</tbody>
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Task: Look at the notes (below) and use them to complete the texts. Change the order of ideas to fit the topic in the first two sentences.

hands / protect / heat-resistant gloves / lab coats / wear / protect clothes from chemicals

The laboratory is a hazardous place so always use the safety equipment. Safety glasses are used to protect eyes.

Make sure you wear protective clothing so that chemicals or flames cannot cause damage.

Eyes can be protected using safety glasses.

4. Unit 8 Paragraph development

A paragraph is easier to read when each sentence starts with something the reader already knows. The sentence starts with an idea that is familiar to the reader, because it has already been given, and the new information follows in the second part of the sentence. In academic writing in English, the writer takes responsibility for making the text easy to read.
The new information at the end of one sentence can be repackaged as familiar information to become the topic of the next sentence. The repackaged information is in a shorter summarized form. It can be a noun phrase that repeats a noun from the previous sentence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>topic</th>
<th>linking verb</th>
<th>new information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maysoun</td>
<td>finds</td>
<td>two health advice websites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One website</td>
<td>is</td>
<td>very clear, but the other is not.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Task: The sentences a-g, below, form a complete paragraph. Tick the appropriate sentence (1 or 2) in b, e and g so the ideas link clearly from familiar to new.

a  The risk of becoming infected with Lyme disease is not high, because only a few ticks carry the bacteria.

b  1. Also, it is only at the end of a blood feed that the bacteria spread from the tick into the bite.
   2. Also, the bacteria do not spread from the tick into the bite until the end of a blood feed.

c  This delay means that infection can be avoided if the tick is removed early.

d  If the tick is not detected early, it might infect the bite.

e  1. The bite then develops a characteristic circular, spreading rash.
   2. A characteristic circular, spreading rash is then developed round the bite.

f  Once you see this symptom more serious symptoms such as heart problems may develop.

g  1. To avoid any serious effects, it is important to be treated quickly with antibiotics.
   2. It is important to be treated quickly with antibiotics to avoid any serious effects.
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