Effects of Instruction on Chinese College Students' Thematic Choice in Academic Writing

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Abstract

The Theme is a major aspect of how speakers construct their messages in a way which makes them fit smoothly into the unfolding language event. Thematic choice provides clues as to how English learners organize information and shape their texts. Previous studies reveal that English learners deviated from English native speakers in their thematic choices, leading to failure in signaling what the text is about. The findings have led to a consensus that English learners should be trained in thematic choices so that they are able to write well-developed essays. This quasi-experimental research aimed to investigate the effects of instruction on Chinese college students' thematic choices in their academic English writing, and proved that instruction in thematic choice produced positive effects on Chinese college students' use of topical Themes, interpersonal Themes, unmarked Themes, and conjunctive adjuncts.

Keywords: Theme; thematic choice; instruction; Chinese college students; English academic writing

1. Introduction

The Theme is a major aspect of "how speakers construct their messages in a way which makes them fit smoothly into the unfolding language event" (Thompson, 2014). The Theme is the starting point of a message, "that which the clause is about" (Halliday, 2014). It is followed by the Rheme, which is "part of the assembly of the new information that the text offers" (Cummings, 2003). What comes first (i.e., in Theme position) in an English clause is vital for how readers view the text as message because they are culturally primed to have certain expectations about Theme and Rheme (Hoey, 2005).

Previous studies reveal that English learners deviated from English native speakers in their thematic choices, which leads to failure in signaling "what the text is about" (Thompson, 2014, p. 165). Learner English is found to be less dense in information than native speaker English as English learners overuse textual Themes (Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo, 1998; Boström Aronsson, 2005; Ebrahimi & Khedri, 2013; Hu, 2008; Jalilifar, 2010; Leedham, 2014; Rørvik & Egan, 2013; Wei, 2013a, 2013b), interpersonal Themes (Green, Christopher, & Mei, 2000; Herriman & Boström Aronsson, 2009; Lu, 2013; Wei, 2016), and marked Themes (Green et al., 2000; Herriman & Boström Aronsson, 2009; Lu, 2013; Wei, 2014).

These findings have led to a consensus that English learners should be trained in thematic choices so that they are able to write well-developed essays (Alvin, 2015; Blake, 2015; Park & Lu, 2015; Soleymanzadeh & Gholami, 2014; Wang, 2007) as "discourse-driven word order patterns are … largely ignored in descriptive grammars, teacher instruction and language teaching materials" (Bohnacker, 2010, p. 133). It is proposed that "coaching in thematisation...at least rudimentary thematisation theory" (Hawes & Thomas, 2012, p.182), or a genre-based approach to teaching deconstructing genre models for TP patterns (Christie & Dreyfus, 2007) is needed to give students practice "with an assortment of thematic options...based on our students' apparent inadequate familiarity with English information structure" (Hawes & Thomas, 2012, p.182).

However, only a limited number of studies probe into the effects of instruction on thematic choices in Chinese college students' academic writing. These studies show that explicit teaching of thematic choices have positive effects on the quality of English learners' essays (Cheng, 2008) and that thematisation analysis approach to instruction helps improve the structure and texture of English learners' essays in terms of the schematic and clause structure (Ho, 2009). The effects of instruction in English learners' use of thematic choices, though, would be better understood with the research design including a control group (Cheng, 2008), under relatively longer period of instruction as it required time for instruction results to emerge (Ho, 2009).

The present research, by adopting a quasi-experimental research design which included the recruitment of an experimental group and a control group, the implementation of 10-week instruction in thematic choices, data collected before and after the instruction, and a combination of qualitative and quantitative data analysis, aims to investigate the effects of instruction on Chinese college students thematic choices in their academic English writing. It specifically intends to answer the following three questions:

1) How do Chinese college students make thematic choice before the instruction?
2) How do Chinese college students make thematic choice after the instruction?
3) How does the instruction affect Chinese college students' thematic choice?

2. The Theme

The Theme is defined by Halliday as the "point of departure of the message" (1967, p. 212), "the peg on which the message is hung" (1970, p. 161), "what the message is about" (1985, p. 38), and "what locates and orients the clause within its context" (2014, p. 64). It can be recognized by the fact that it "is put in the first position" (Halliday, 1985, p. 38). The Theme orients the listener/reader to the message that is about to be perceived and provides a framework for the interpretation of the message. The Theme typically contains familiar, old or given information, which has already been mentioned somewhere in the text, or it is shared or mutual knowledge from the immediate context.

It should be noted that there are alternative definitions of Theme proposed by other scholars (for example, Berry, 1995; Forey, 2002; North, 2005). However, in the present research, the definition of Theme by Halliday is adopted.

2.1 Types of Theme

Three types of Theme in terms of textual metafunction and two types of topical Theme in terms of thematic markedness were distinguished, following SFG (Halliday, 2014). Tables 1 and 2 provide details of the Theme types and their sub-types.

Table 1. Theme types in terms of textual metafunction.

Type	Sub-type
Topical Theme	/
Textual Theme	Continuative Conjunction Conjunctive adjunct
Interpersonal Theme	Vocative Modal adjunct Mood-marking

Table 2. Topical Themes in terms of thematic markedness.

Type	Sub-type
Topical Theme	Unmarked Theme Marked Theme

2.2 Topical Theme

The element that is typically chosen as topical Theme in an English clause depends on the choice of mood (Halliday, 2014, p. 97). All free major clauses are either indicative or imperative in mood; if indicative, they are either declarative or interrogative; if interrogative, they are either "yes/no" interrogative or "WH"-interrogative.

2.2.1 Topical Theme in declarative clauses

The typical topical Theme in a declarative clause is conflated with the subject. For example, *We* is both subject and Theme in, *We lock our keys inside the car*. The mapping of Theme on to subject is the unmarked Theme of a declarative clause.

A Theme that is something other than the subject in a declarative clause is a marked Theme. The most usual form of a marked Theme is an adverbial group, such as *today*, *suddenly*, *somewhat distractingly*, or a prepositional phrase, such as *at night*, *in the corner*, *without any warning*, functioning as an adjunct in the clause.

2.2.2 Topical Theme in interrogative clauses

In a yes/no interrogative, which is a question about polarity, the element that functions as Theme is the element that embodies the expression of polarity, namely the finite verbal operator that expresses positive or negative meanings: *is*, *isn't*; *do*, *don't*; *can*, *can't*; and so on.

In a WH-interrogative, which is a search for a missing piece of information, the element that functions as Theme is the element that requires this information, namely the WH-element: *who*, *what*, *when*, *how*, and so on.

2.2.3 Topical Theme in imperative clauses

The basic message of an imperative clause is either "I want you to do something" or "I want us to do something". With the first type, the most typical Theme is the verb. For example, in *Keep quiet*, the verb *Keep* is the unmarked Theme. The second type usually begins with *let's*, which is the unmarked choice of Theme. In negative imperatives, such as *Don't argue with me* the unmarked Theme is *don't* plus the verb.

2.2.4 Topical Theme in clause complexes

What has been discussed so far is exclusive to Themes in single clauses. The Theme in a clause complex, which consists of more than one clause, is also discussed in the literature on SFG (for example, Halliday, 2014, and Thompson, 2014). Thompson (2014) points out that "when a dependent clause in a clause complex precedes the clause on which it depends, there appear to be good practical reasons for analyzing the dependent clause as the

Theme for the whole clause complex" (p. 159). According to Halliday (2014), the thematic principle also lies behind the organization in a clause complex. He pointed out that, in a clause complex, there will be two thematic domains — that of the clause complex and that of the clause, as shown in Figure 1. The Theme in version (2) is the clause. Clauses are thematized to show contingency, such as condition and concession, or other purposes, such as cause and manner (McCabe, 1999, p. 148).

	When James Joyce	wrote this in Ulysses",	he	meant the first part of his comment to be provocative.
(1)	Theme	Rheme	Theme	Rheme
(2)	Theme		Rheme	

Figure 1. Theme in clause complex.

Regarding the order of clauses in a clause complex, Halliday argues (2014) that the default order of clauses is independent clause followed by dependent clause, while a dependent clause in initial position constitutes a marked choice of Theme (pp. 549–551). In line with this, the clausal Theme in a clause complex is unmarked if it serves as the subject; it is a marked Theme if it is not mapped onto the subject of the clause.

2.3 Textual Themes

Topical Themes may be preceded by elements that are textual and/or interpersonal in function, in which case these are also part of the Theme. The textual Theme is any combination of continuatives, structurals, and conjunctives (Halliday, 2014, pp. 107–108). A continuative is one of a small set of discourse signalers, such as *yes*, *no*, *well*, *oh*, or *now*, which signal that a new move is beginning; it can also be a response in dialogue, or a move to the next point if the same speaker is continuing. A structural Theme is any of the obligatorily thematic elements, including coordinating (e.g., *and*, *but*, *for*, *or*, *nor*, *so*, *yet*, etc.) and subordinating conjunctions (e.g., *if*, *when*, *because*, *since*, *even though*, etc.). Coordinating conjunctions act as textual themes (in T-units); but subordinating conjunctions only act as structural themes in dependent clauses, so are not in fact relevant to the present study. A conjunctive Theme is one of the conjunctive adjuncts listed in Table 4 wherever such an adjunct occurs preceding the topical Theme. Conjunctions are different from conjunctive adjuncts (see Table 4) as they not only establish semantic relationships between meanings, but also "set up a grammatical (systemic-structural) relationship with another clause" (Halliday, 2014, p. 110).

2.4 Interpersonal Themes

The interpersonal Theme is any combination of vocatives, modals, and mood-markings (Halliday, 2014, pp. 110–111). A vocative is any item, typically (but not necessarily) a personal name, used to address the listener/reader; it may come more or less anywhere in the clause, and is thematic if preceding the topical Theme. A modal Theme is any of the modal adjuncts that has the meaning of probability, usuality, typicality, obviousness, opinion, admission, persuasion, entreaty, presumption, desirability, reservation, validation, evaluation, or prediction whenever it occurs preceding the topical Theme. A mood-marking Theme is a finite verbal operator, if preceding the topical Theme, as *Are* in *Are they still together?*; or a WH-interrogative (or imperative *let's*) when not preceded by another experiential element (i.e., when functioning simultaneously as topical Theme), as *Where* in *Where did you get that?*, or *Let's* in *Let's have a cup of coffee*.

In this study, the concept of grammatical metaphor (Halliday, 1994, 2004, 2014) was adopted so that clauses which express opinions, such as *I think*, *I believe*, and *as far as I am concerned,* were categorized as interpersonal Themes. A grammatical metaphor can be "of an experiential kind, with the metaphorical process taking place in the ideational process, or the interpersonal process" (Halliday, 1994, p. 58). For example, *I don't believe,* in the clause complex, *I don't believe that pudding will ever be cooked,* is a grammatical metaphor for "in my opinion, … not likely…". The metaphorical construction can be seen from the tagged form of this sentence: *I don't believe that pudding will ever be cooked, will it?*. The expression, *I don't believe,* is functioning as an interpersonal (modal) Theme. Other examples are: *I dare say you'll see her soon*, *I think I'll go and meet her*, *Do you suppose that they could get it clear?*, where similarly the tags would be *won't you?*, *shall I?,* and *could they?*.

The analysis is given in Figure 2: the literal, or congruent, interpretation is shown in version (1), the metaphorical in version (2). In the present research, version (2) – the metaphorical interpretation – was adopted when analyzing the data.

	I	don't believe	that pudding	ever will be cooked
(1)	Theme	Rheme	Theme	Rheme
(2)	interpersonal (modal)		topical	
	Theme		Rheme	

Figure 2. Interpersonal Theme resulting from grammatical metaphor.

(Halliday, 2014, p. 687)

2.5 Marked Themes

The mapping of Theme onto subject is considered as the unmarked Theme of a declarative clause, which is normally the element chosen as the Theme unless there is good reason for choosing something else (Halliday, 2014, p. 98). For example, in *We spent Christmas happily together*, *We* is the subject as well as the Theme, therefore unmarked, while in *Happily together we spent the Christmas*, *Happily together* is an adverbial instead of the subject, therefore marked Theme. In accordance with thematic markedness, the topical Themes can be categorized into marked and unmarked Themes.

Halliday (2014, pp. 98–100) posits a cline of markedness, capturing the likelihood of any of these elements occurring in initial position in the clause. The most common form of marked Theme is an adverbial group or prepositional phrase functioning as circumstantial adjunct, like *Happily together* in *Happily together we spent the Christmas*, or *In the corner* in *In the corner there is a chair*. The least likely, and thus the most marked, is a complement, which is a nominal group that could have been chosen as the subject but was not, like *You* in *You I blame for this*.

The identification of marked or unmarked Theme is determined by the mood of the clause, whether the clause is declarative, interrogative, or imperative. The unmarked Theme is realized by the subject in a declarative clause, the operator in a polar interrogative clause, the WH-element in a WH-interrogative clause, or the overt subject or verb if starting with these in an imperative clause. Other elements in the Theme position would be identified as marked Themes.

Marked Themes can be further analyzed as five subtypes: (i) spatial, (ii) temporal, (iii) manner, (iv) cause, and (v) contingency (Halliday, 2014, pp. 314–324).

3. Research design

3.1 Participants

Two classes of fourth year college students in the College of International Studies at Southwest University[1] in Chongqing, China were recruited for this study.

The Chinese participants in this study were English majors in their senior year, and were presumed to be at the same level of English proficiency as they were randomly assigned by the college to different classes when they were enrolled as first-year students.

This study was a "quasi-experimental design", as it was not possible to randomize all of the participants into new groups because of the school's policy and regular teaching program and thus the students remained intact in their regular classes during the study. Therefore, one class of Chinese students were assigned as the experimental group, and the other class of Chinese students the control group.

Only the participants who took part in all the phases of the study (i.e. the instruction, pre- and post-instruction writing tasks) were included in the final data pool. Initially, a total of 63 participants were recruited for this study. However, three participants were excluded from the final data pool: two being absent at either the pre- or post- instruction writing tasks and one being absent for the instructional sessions. The present study therefore involves a total of 60 participants from 2 groups: the experimental group comprising of 30 Chinese college students, and the control group comprising of 30 Chinese college students.

3.2 The essays tasks

The participants were asked to write on the following two topics, before and after the instruction. The two topics were taken from writing tasks for IELTS tests (Yang, 2015) and the students were given 30 minutes to write the essays. The assigning of the topics for pre-writing task was random and they were required to write on the other topic for post-writing task, which means the participant who wrote on topic 1 in pre-writing task was assigned to write on topic 2 in post-writing task.

Topic 1: Nowadays it is difficult for university students to find a job. Analyze the individual and social reasons and offer some solutions.

Topic 2: Some people believe college or university education should be available to all students. Others believe that higher education should be available only to good students. Which view do you agree with?

3.3 The instruction

The instruction was given in the participants' regular classroom during regular class hours, which were scheduled for English lessons. The ten sessions of the instruction in thematic choice were delivered by the researcher who was also the participants' regular classroom teacher.

The duration of the instruction was about eight hours (50 minutes for each of the 10 sessions) in 10 consecutive weeks. The instruction was only delivered to CE group, i.e., the experimental group. During the same period of time, regular lessons in essay writing were delivered to CC group, i.e., the control group, which included ten sessions on planning the writing, structuring paragraphs, writing introductions, writing conclusions,

and the writing of one essay.

3.4 The data

The data in this research comprised 120 essays from four categories, with 30 essays from each category: to denote the identity of the student writer, essays from the experimental group of Chinese students before the instruction are referred to as "CE pre" plus a number between 1 and 30, essays from the experimental group of Chinese students after the instruction are referred to as "CE post" plus a number, essays from the control group of Chinese students before the instruction are referred to as "CC pre" plus a number, and essays from the control group of Chinese students after the instruction are referred to as "CC post" plus a number. The 120 essays, which were collected between September and November, 2015, totaled 32,274 words. All the essays were used with the permission of the participants.

3.5 Analytical framework

3.5.1 Unit of analysis

The T-unit was used as the basic unit of analysis in this research. A T-unit is a clause complex which contains one main independent clause together with all the hypotactic clauses which are dependent on it (Fries, 1995, p. 318). The T-unit was used in the present research because "analyzing Theme at the level of T-unit rather than the individual clause ... can ... be justified on the grounds that the thematic structure of a dependent clause is often constrained by the independent clause" (Fries & Francis, 1992, p. 6).

3.5.2 Division of Theme and Rheme

The division of Theme and Rheme was drawn, following Halliday (2014, p. 91), after the first experiential constituent, i.e., the constituent which represents a participant, circumstance, or process, which Halliday labels as the topical Theme. The Theme would also include any element preceding the topical Theme or the first experiential constituent. It should be noted, however, that an extended definition of the Theme which suggests that the subject be regarded as thematic has been proposed (e.g., Davies, 1994; Fawcett, 2008; North, 2005; Rose, 2001). Halliday's division of Theme and Rheme was adopted in the present research because it reflects topic continuity better (Davies, 1997; Fries, 1995) and therefore provides a more sophisticated understanding of thematic progression as a texturing resource (Thompson & Thompson, 2009).

3.5.3 Procedures

The following procedures were used in the analysis of the English essays:

1) Locate and number each T-unit;

2) Identify the Theme/Rheme division in each T-unit with a slash "/";

3) Identify Types of Theme in each essay in accordance with Section 2;

4) Count the raw numbers of different types of TP patterns and unmotivated Themes, and calculate their proportion.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Topical, textual and interpersonal Themes in CE and CC pre- and post- writing

Table 3 compares the proportion of topical, textual, and interpersonal Themes in CE and CC pre- and post-writing. The proportion of different types of Themes was calculated by dividing the number of each type of Theme by the total number of all three types of Themes. After the instruction, there were slight changes in thematic choices in CE writing. They used proportionally more topical Themes (74% vs. 73%), more textual Themes (20% vs. 19%), and less interpersonal Themes (6% vs. 8%). As for CC group, there were also some changes in their writing before and after the same period of time. They used slightly more topical Themes (71% vs. 70%), the same proportion of textual Themes (21% vs. 21%), and less interpersonal Themes (8% vs. 9%) in their pre- and post- writing.

Table 3 Topical, textual and interpersonal Themes

Theme	CE pre		CE post		CC pre		CC post	
Topical	501	73%	537	74%	457	70%	481	71%
Textual	130	19%	145	20%	137	21%	142	21%
Interpersonal	54	8%	44	6%	59	9%	54	8%
Total	685	100%	726	100%	653	100%	677	100%

4.2 Topical Themes: marked and unmarked Themes

Table 4 compares the proportion of marked Themes and unmarked Themes in CE and CC pre- and post- writing. The proportion of marked and unmarked Themes was calculated by dividing the number of marked and unmarked Themes by the total number of T-units. CE group used less marked Themes (18% vs. 20%) and more unmarked Themes (82% vs. 80%), while there has not been any changes in the proportion in marked and unmarked Themes in CC pre- and post- writing.

Table 4 Marked and unmarked Themes

	CE pre		CE post		CC pre		CC post	
Marked	100	20%	97	18%	96	21%	101	21%
Unmarked	401	80%	440	82%	361	79%	380	79%
T-unit	501	100%	537	100%	457	100%	481	100%

We further analyzed the element in marked Themes in CC and CE pre- and post- writing. Table 5 presents the details.

Table 5 Marked Themes

Marked Themes	CE pre		CE post		CC pre		CC post	
Temporal	36	36%	29	30%	44	46%	44	44%
Spatial	22	22%	10	10%	16	17%	15	15%
Manner	13	13%	21	22%	4	4%	6	5%
Cause	8	8%	16	16%	12	12%	9	9%
Contingency	21	21%	21	22%	20	21%	27	27%
Total	100	100%	97	100%	96	100%	101	100%

Table 5 shows that there were some changes in marked Themes in CE writing. They used less adjuncts expressing temporal (30% vs. 36%) and spatial (10% vs. 22%), and more adjunct for manner (22% vs. 13%), cause (16% vs. 8%) and contingency (22% vs. 21) in their post-writing. There were also some changes in CC post-writing. They used less adjuncts for temporal (44% vs. 46%), spatial (15% vs. 17%) and cause (9% vs. 12%), and more adjuncts expressing manner (5% vs. 4%) and contingency (27% vs. 21%).

4.3 Textual Themes: continuatives, conjunctions and conjunctive adjuncts
Table 6 compares continuatives, conjunctions and conjunctive adjuncts in CE and CC pre- and post- writing.

Table 6 Continuatives, conjunctions and conjunctive adjuncts

	CE pre		CE post		CC pre		CC post	
Continuatives	0		0		0		0	
Conjunctions	52	40%	65	45%	58	42%	58	41%
Conjunctive adjuncts	78	60%	80	55%	79	58%	84	59%
Total	130	100%	145	100%	137	100%	142	100%

Neither CE nor CC group used any continuatives in their writings, which is probably due to the fact that they were working on a writing task. Continuatives such as *yes*, *no*, *well*, *oh*, *now* are discourse signalers, which signal that a new move is beginning in oral discourse (Halliday, 2014). There were more conjunctions used in CE post-writing (45%) than CE pre-writing (40%). As a result, there were less conjunctive adjuncts in CE post-writing (55%) than in CE pre-writing (60%). In contrast to the results from comparison of CE pre- and post- writing, there were less conjunctions used in CC post-writing (41%) than pre-writing (42%), and as a result, there were more conjunctive adjuncts in CC post-writing (59%) than their pre-writing (58%).

Table 7 shows the raw numbers and proportion of conjunctive adjuncts in CE and CC pre- and post-writing. In comparison, CE group used more conjunctive adjuncts expressing temporal (38% vs. 35%) and other conjunctive adjuncts (26% vs. 22%), and less conjunctive adjuncts for additive (7% vs. 12%) or adversative (26% vs. 16%) in post-writing than pre-writing.

Table 7 Conjunctive adjuncts

Conjunctive adjuncts	CE pre		CE post		CC pre		CC post	
temporal	27	35%	30	38%	33	42%	31	37%
additive	24	31%	23	29%	15	19%	19	23%
adversative	9	12%	6	7%	8	10%	8	10%
other	18	22%	21	26%	23	29%	25	30%
Total	78	100%	80	100%	79	100%	84	100%

CC group used more conjunctive adjuncts in their post-writing mainly because they group used slightly more conjunctive adjuncts expressing additive (23% vs. 19%) and other conjunctive adjuncts (30% vs. 29%). And they used less conjunctive adjuncts expressing temporal (37% vs. 42%) in their post-writing.

Table 8 compares conjunctions used in CE as well as CC pre- and post- writing. Only paratactic conjunctions were found in all the writing because T-unit was used as the unit of analysis in this research: if the clauses containing hypotactic conjunctions occur in the beginning of the T-unit, they are categorized as marked Themes; and if they appear in the latter half of the T-unit, they are categorized as clausal Theme or part of the Rheme in each T-unit. There were more *and* (47% vs. 43%) and other conjunctions (5% vs. 0%), and less *so* (26% vs. 29%) or *but* (22% vs. 28%) used in CE post- writing than their pre- writing. CC group used less *and* (42 vs. 43%) and *but* (18% vs. 22%), but more *so* (40% vs. 35%) in their post-writing.

Table 8 Conjunctions

	CE pre		CE post		CC pre		CC post	
And	22	43%	31	47%	25	43%	24	42%
So	15	29%	17	26%	20	35%	23	40%
But	15	28%	14	22%	13	22%	11	18%
Other	0	0%	3	5%	0	0%	0	0%
Total	52	100%	65	100%	58	100%	58	100%

4.4 Interpersonal Themes

Table 9 provides findings about interpersonal Themes in CE and CC pre- and post- writing. Neither group used any vocative Themes in their writing. CE group used proportionally less mood-marking Themes (10% vs. 13%) and more modal adjuncts (90% vs. 87%) in post-writing than in pre-writing, while CC group used more mood-marking Themes (18% vs. 14%) and less modal adjuncts (82% vs. 86%) in post-writing. However, on the whole, both CE group and CC group used less interpersonal Themes in their post-writing.

Table 9 Interpersonal Themes

	CE pre		CE post		CC pre		CC post	
Vocative	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Modal Adjuncts	47	87%	40	90%	51	86%	44	82%
Mood marking	7	13 %	4	10 %	8	14%	10	18%
Total	54	100%	44	100%	59	100%	54	100%

5. Conclusion

This paper aims to examine whether there were any changes in how CE group make thematic choices in their English academic writing after the instruction as compared to before the instruction. To eliminate possible changes as a result of the increased time of learning English, CC group's thematic choice before and after the same period of time was also compared. The frequency of each type of Theme was counted and the proportion was also calculated. Research results show that CE group make better thematic choices after the instruction as they used more topical and textual Themes, and less interpersonal Themes after the instruction while CC group did not exhibit significant changes. CE group also used less unmarked Themes, less conjunctive adjuncts, and less mood-marking Themes after the instruction, which means they exhibit similar performances in thematic choice as native speakers (Wei, 2016).

At the beginning of this paper, I drew attention to the areas in thematic choice that Chinese English learners need instruction, which could help them choose the right kind of information to place in Theme position and keep the key concepts repeating and flowing in their writings. This research demonstrated that Chinese English learners need to be informed of the functions Themes can play in building up the framework of a text (Wei, 2015), which include signaling what the speaker thinks is a suitable starting point, the genre differences between writing and speaking, and maintenance or progression of "what the text is about" (Thompson, 2014, p.165).

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