Exploring Thematic Analysis as a Possible Self-Revision Method for ESL/EFL Writers

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Thematic analysis using Systemic Functional Grammar basically examines the textual aspect of a piece of writing, analysing the deployment and arrangement of themes in a text. Thematic choice has been shown in the literature to have a great impact on the general structure of a text and contributes significantly to its local and global (in)coherence (e.g., Berry, 1995; Francis, 1989; Halliday & Martin, 1993). But none of the previous studies seems to have tried to make this type of analysis simple enough so that it can be readily accessible to ESL or EFL student writers for self revision purposes with respect to the local and global coherence of their essays. This paper is a first attempt in this direction. On the basis of an extensive review of literature on thematic analysis, a simple four-step procedure for this type of analysis has been designed, which is then demonstrated through an analysis of two student essays, one with good coherence and the other suffering from lack of coherence. It is believed that by going through this type of analysis, student writers should be able to better appreciate the concept of coherence and to organise their essays in a more coherent way.

INTRODUCTION

Most would agree that the concept of coherence is abstract and fuzzy and is very often difficult to lay a firm grip on. There is yet to be an agreed definition and even an adequate theory about it (Bublitz, 1999; Lee, 2002). This sometimes poses a great problem for ESL or EFL teachers of writing and their student writers. On the one hand, teachers of writing may often find their students consistently writing incoherent paragraphs or essays despite their numerous hours of instruction on organisational matters. They may sometimes find it difficult to offer more explicit and constructive help or guidelines to their students so that they can revise their writing on their own. ESL or EFL student writers, on the other hand, may also feel frustrated at being consistently failed by their

teachers for the incoherence of their essays and not knowing how to proceed in order to improve their writing. This paper attempts to develop a tool of thematic analysis that ESL or EFL student writers can use for revising their essays with respect to the coherence of these essays. The use of thematic analysis for essay revision is based on the premise that thematic choice, that is, the choice of what information to place in sentence initial position, is significant in that apt use of themes and thematic patterning contributes to the coherence of a text, and inappropriate use of themes and thematic patterning leads to the loss of coherence of a text (Fries, 1983, 1995; Francis, 1989; Berry, 1995).

The use of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) in writing classes is not new as SFG, unlike other types of grammars such as traditional and transformational grammars, is text-focused, context-oriented, meaning-centred, and views language as a resource for making meaning (Berry, 1996; Gerot & Wignell, 1994). But the application has, until recently, been very often restricted to the use of genres in helping young children with their initial writing tasks in primary school settings (e.g., Martin, 1985; Rothery, 1984) or to the use of cohesive devices in English language teaching syllabi (Bloor & Bloor, 1995).

Although an increasing number of studies have been done recently which have shown positive relationships between thematic choice and thematic patterning on the one hand, and the quality of writing, on the other (e.g., Berry, 1995; Francis, 1989; Halliday & Martin, 1993; Mauranen, 1996; Nwogu & Bloor, 1991; Ventola & Mauranen, 1991; Whittaker, 1995), most of these studies do not seem to have a clear pedagogical focus and thus fail to provide ESL or EFL learners with a clear step-by-step guideline to follow in their essay revision. Based on the work on Theme by Halliday (1985, 1994), Fries (1983, 1992, 1995), and Martin (1992, 1995), this study proposes a four-step procedure for students to follow in the revision of their own essays. In order to show how this procedure is used, two student essays will be analysed.

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Teacher feedback, peer review and self-revision in ESL or EFL writing

Second or foreign language writing research has focused on the provision of teacher and peer feedback. In terms of teacher feedback, there is a continuing debate as to what types of feedback (e.g., form-focused or content-focused feedback) and what sequence in offering the different types of feedback are more beneficial to the improvement of the quality of students' writing (e.g., Ashwell, 2001; Cardelle & Corno, 1981; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Kepner, 1991; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Semke, 1984; Zamel, 1985). But results have been mixed and inconclusive. This is understandable as form-focused feedback alone can hardly improve the quality of a totally incoherent text. Similarly, content-focused feedback, often in the form of vague and idiosyncratic comments on the general organisation of a text, may sometimes lead to confusion and bewilderment on the part of student writers.

With reference to peer feedback, both positive and negative results have been obtained (Jacobs, Gurtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998; Zhang, 1995). While peer feedback has been found useful in the establishment of group cohesion like the enhancement of a sense of audience and the encouragement of collaborative learning, it does not seem to contribute significantly to the quality of revised essays. This is again understandable as students need to be appropriately trained to provide quality feedback especially on the coherence of a text.

While acknowledging the importance of teacher and peer feedback, we find there is also a strong need to train our students to make self correction of coherence problems in their own writing. We believe that once students are able to do this, student writers should be better able to appreciate the concept of coherence and thus be able to organise their essays in a more coherent way.

Text-based studies of ESL or EFL writing

There has been substantial research interest in the various aspects of ESL or EFL writers' texts, dating back probably to the very beginning of the teaching of this particular skill. Over the years, researchers in this area have mainly focused on a number of

sentence level features and intersentential cohesive quality of ESL or EFL writers' texts, including, for example, linguistic accuracy, lexical features, and syntactic complexity (for a review of some of these studies, see Polio, 2001). However, not many studies have focused on the area of coherence and discourse features, especially on the overall organisation of a text. One of the few exceptions is the Topical Structure Analysis used by Connor and her associates (Cerniglia, Medsker & Connor, 1990; Connor & Farmer, 1990; Schneider & Connor, 1990).

Topical Structure Analysis as used by Connor and her associates was originally developed by Lautamatti (1978) for purposes other than language teaching. Following Lautamatti, Connor and her associates identify three types of sentence progression in a text: parallel, sequential, and extended parallel. According to them, parallel progression, in which a topic is repeated, has the function of reinforcing an idea for the reader; sequential progression, in which the topic of a sentence is derived from the content of the comment in the previous sentence, helps to develop individual topics by adding details to an idea; and for extended parallel progression, the writer returns to a topic mentioned earlier in the essay.

Topic Structure Analysis is claimed to be an effective revision strategy for many ESL writers (Connor & Farmer, 1990), but is not without its problems. One of these problems is sometimes the intuitive nature of the identification of sentence topics. For example, in a sentence with multiple noun phrases like "the briefcase bulged with unfinished paperwork so that the seams nearly split open" (Cerniglia, Medsker, & Connor, 1990: 236), it will be somewhat arbitrary to say that "the briefcase" is the topic of the sentence and not the other two noun phrases – "unfinished paperwork" and "the seams". Another problem has to do with the rather subjective nature of the interpretation of the patterns of topic progression: there is no clear and definite answer as to which type of topic progression is preferred to the others in different contexts. In their study of essays written for TOEFL Test of Written English (TWE), Schneider & Connor (1990) found that the highest rated TWE essays (6s) contained proportionally more sequential topics and fewer parallel topics than either the low- or middle-rated essays (3s and 4s). How would this finding be interpreted in ESL or EFL

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writing classrooms? Does it mean that ESL or EFL teachers of writing should instruct their students to write more sequential topics and fewer parallel topics in their essays? What would the proportion be? And should this instruction be applicable to all types of writing? These questions may not receive any satisfactory answers from Topical Structure Analysis. One final problem with this type of analysis is their lumping together of sentence topics across the essay rather than at the paragraph level. This may, on the one hand, conflate the number of sequential topics as different paragraphs very often deal with different topics, and on the other, obscure the structural differences of different paragraphs (i.e., introductory, main body, and concluding paragraphs).

Bearing these problems in mind, this study attempts to present to EFL and ESL writers an alternative approach to essay revision, which will deal with coherence not only at the essay level but also at the paragraph level.

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS

Theme

Theme is characterised by Halliday (1985: 39) as "the starting-point of the message" and "what the clause is going to be about". It is used as the framework for interpreting the rest of the clause or sentence (i.e., the Rheme of the clause or sentence) (Fries, 1992, 1995). According to Fries (1983: 135), "the information contained within the themes of all of the sentences of a paragraph creates the Method of Development of that paragraph." In other words, the choice of theme is a great determinant of whether a particular paragraph is successful in manipulating readers' attention and contributing to the interpretation of texts.

The theme can be identified, according to Halliday (1994: 38), as "that element which comes in first position in the clause." But exactly how much of what comes first in a sentence counts as theme is subject to controversy (Berry, 1995; Francis, 1989; Martin, Mathiessen & Painter, 1997). In this paper, I adopt the mainstream Hallidayan approach to the identification of Theme. The Theme of a sentence in this approach extends to and includes the first "topical" element, which can be nominal groups, adverbial groups,

prepositional phrases or embedded clauses (Gerot & Wignell, 1994; Martin, Mathiessen & Painter, 1997).[1]

Macro-theme and hyper-theme

The term Hyper-Theme was originally used by Danes (1974: 120), a Prague School linguist, to refer to the "over-arching" theme which predicts a number of ensuing themes. On this basis, Martin (1992: 14) revised Danes' characterisation of hyper-theme to "embrace an introductory clause or group of clauses which is established to predict a pattern of Theme selection in following clauses." So Hyper-Theme in Martin's sense corresponds roughly with the concept of topic sentence of school rhetoric and traditional composition teaching. To put it simply, Hyper-Theme in this paper refers to the one or two sentences in a paragraph which tells the reader what the whole paragraph is about or is going to be about.

Macro-Theme, on the other hand, is defined by Martin (1992: 14) as "a clause or group of clauses (possibly a paragraph) which predicts a set of hyper-themes." A Macro-Theme, according to Martin, would tend to correlate with the introductory paragraph of school rhetoric. To me, it would be more or less comparable with the thesis statement in the introductory paragraph of composition rhetoric. Thus, Macro-Theme in this paper is redefined as the one or two sentences in the introductory paragraph(s) which tells the reader what the whole essay is going to be about.

Analytic steps

The following steps are formulated so that ESL or EFL students could do a thematic analysis of their essays.

Step 1. Look for a macro-theme

In this step, students are asked to identify the one or two sentences in the introductory paragraph(s) of an essay with links to the essay topic, telling the reader what the essay is going to be about and predicting, either directly or indirectly, a set of Hyper-Themes in the main body paragraphs. If no such sentences can be identified, students should then try to write one, asking themselves what they

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have written in their essays and summarising it in one or two sentences in the introductory paragraph(s).

Step 2. Look for hyper-themes

In this step, students are asked to identify the one or two sentences in each main body paragraph which tell the reader what the whole paragraph is about or is going to be about. The identified sentence (s) should, at the same time, support and elaborate the Macro-Theme in the introductory paragraph(s).

Step 3. Decide if the hyper-themes are predictable from the macro-theme

Once the Macro-Theme and a set of Hyper-Themes are identified, the next natural step is to examine the relationship between them. In this step, students are asked to decide whether their Macro-Theme can predict, either directly or indirectly, a set of Hyper-Themes in the main body paragraphs. When a Macro-Theme directly predicts a set of Hyper-Themes, it tells the reader explicitly how many Hyper-Themes there will be and what these Hyper-Themes will be about. When a Macro-Theme indirectly predicts a set of Hyper-Themes, it tells the reader what the general domain (e.g., the causes and effects for the cause-effect type of explanatory essay) will be for that set of Hyper-Themes, but does not tell the reader exactly how many Hyper-Themes there will be and precisely what these Hyper-Themes will be about.

Step 4. Examine the content of the Themes in a paragraph. Does the content of the Themes in each paragraph exhibit a clear line of development for the topic of the paragraph?

While the preceding three steps deal with the global coherence between paragraphs and of the whole essay, this step deals with the local coherence of a single main body paragraph. Students are asked to examine the content or, to use Fries' technical term, the semantic field of all the themes in a main body paragraph (Fries, 1983), and to decide whether the content of these themes displays a clear line of development for the topic of the paragraph. The line of development for a paragraph, or method of development in Fries' term (Fries, 1983), tells the reader how the paragraph is developed,

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whether through contrasts or through causes or effects or through the recurrent pattern of the topical elements or the content of the themes in that paragraph.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF STUDENT ESSAYS: A DEMONSTRATION

In this section, I analyse two student essays with the title "How has using the Internet affected our (online) privacy?" This analysis serves both as a demonstration so that students know how to carry out analysis of their own essays and also as an example of the value of this type of analysis, that is, to reveal whether a piece of writing is coherent or not.

Students A and B are two first year undergraduate students of computer science taking an English skills course at the National University of Singapore. Their level of English can be rated as advanced. One of the major components of their English course is essay writing. In essay writing, students are required to write three drafts for this essay. The essays analysed here are the second drafts after incorporating peer review comments.

Before we begin our analysis of these two essays, it may be useful to point out some reader expectations for the topic. The answering of the essay question, "How has using the Internet affected our (online) privacy?" entails, first and foremost, the answering of another question: "What are some of the ways in which the Internet has affected our (online) privacy?" Thus, two important elements would seem to be needed for the discussion of the topic: the "what" element and the "how" element.

It should be emphasised that the following analysis only focuses on the coherence aspect of the two essays and does not attempt to make a judgement on their overall quality. In fact, a pre-analysis activity I did with a group of 51 students showed that there were mixed feelings among the students about the overall quality of these two essays. About two thirds of the students think that Student A's essay is better and one third think otherwise. Some of the reasons the students give in support of Student A's essay include better organisation with clear signposting such as the use of "firstly", "secondly", and "lastly" and easy reading with simple and

straightforward language style. The reasons in support of Student B's essay include more sophisticated language use, the provision of more elaborated information for the topic (e.g., the inclusion of definitions and explanations of terms like privacy and hacking), and a more interesting and professional beginning in the introductory paragraph. Thus, students are cautioned that neither of the two essays be regarded as a model for them to follow in their writing.

Thematic analysis of Student A's essay

Step 1. Look for a macro-theme

Student A's essay in Table 1 shows that the Macro-Theme of this essay is evident: Sentence 5 in the first paragraph, as this sentence clearly predicts a set of hyper-themes in the main body paragraphs (except for Paragraph 5) and links back to the topic of the essay.

Macro-Theme: Cookies, computer monitoring and search engines are some examples that caused our privacy to be invaded.

Table 1. Student A's essay

(1) Over the years, information technology has greatly improved and has become a part of our daily lives. (2) In the computer aspect, the Internet can be considered to be one of the most popular technologies used today. (3) The Internet allows fast communication between people from a far and quick access to information. (4) Although the Internet has many advantages, it has some disadvantages as well. (5) Cookies, computer monitoring and search engines are some examples that caused our privacy to be invaded. (6) By having more online activities, our privacy is at risk.
(7) Firstly, computer monitoring is one of the ways that has invaded our privacy. (8) For example, an employer monitors his employee's emails and Web surfing activities so as to increase their productivity and reduce the waste of company's resources. (9) The employee is discouraged from chatting or Web surfing during office hour. (10) But in this way, the employer would be invading his employee's privacy. (11) Personal talks or information about the employee would be known without his own knowledge. (12) When using unix to check emails or for other purposes, it is possible for one person to know whether another person is online through spying. (13) Since the use of the Internet is unavoidable, it should be viewed as a tool like the

telephone that provides reasonable personal usage. (14) Otherwise, our use of the Internet would affect our online privacy.

(15) Secondly, cookies could affect our online privacy. (16) Cookies are used to personalize our interaction with the Web site and enable the server to present us with a customized Web page. (17) In other words, cookies store the sites that we have browsed. (18) Hence if they are not deleted, our personal information and even our passwords could be revel to others who access the sites browsed through the cookies. (19) Therefore, our use of the Internet affected our online privacy.

(20) Thirdly, the Internet has provided such great services that anything that we could not find could be found through the help of search engine. (21) The search engine is so marvelous that it is able to search for anything for us. (22) People's personal profile or confidential information could be obtained through the search engine. (23) In this way, any one could invade into other's privacy.

(24) Lastly, hacking is a problem that put the Internet users at risk of losing their privacy. (25) Hacking is illegally gaining access to and sometimes tampering with information in a computer system. (26) Hackers love to hack into people's email or personal profile to access to passwords or credit card numbers for their own personal gain or pleasure. (27) In life, it is either a lose or a gain situation. (28) As the hackers gained from hacking, we as innocent Internet users lose our privacy on our part.

(29) Therefore, using the Internet affected our online privacy in one way or another. (30) Computer monitoring, hacking, cookies and search engine are the various ways and things that cause the use of the Internet to be affecting our privacy. (31) As of now, we could not totally overcome these factors and save our online privacy. (32) Hence, prevention is still better than cure. (33) Perhaps, we have to be cautious when using the Internet (34) or even our smallest secret could be known to the world. (35) Wouldn't it?

Step 2. Look for hyper-themes

Most of the Hyper-Themes in Student A's essay are not difficult to locate, with three of them being the first sentence of the paragraph (Paragraphs 2, 3, and 5). The only arguable case is the Hyper-Theme for Paragraph 4. The first sentence of this paragraph may be taken as the Hyper-Theme as it follows the "firstly", "secondly", "thirdly", "lastly" progression and it refers specifically to one of the key topical elements in the Macro-Theme "search engine". But the last sentence may seem to be a better option as it either contains or implies all the key topical elements of "search engine", "invade" and "privacy".

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Hyper-Theme 1: Firstly, computer monitoring is one of the ways that has invaded our privacy.

Hyper-Theme 2: Secondly, cookies could affect our online privacy.

Hyper-Theme 3: In this way [=people's personal profile or confidential information being obtainable through the search engine], anyone could invade into other's privacy.

Hyper-Theme 4: Lastly, hacking is a problem that put the Internet users at risk of losing their privacy.

Step 3. Decide if the hyper-themes are predictable from the macro-theme

All the four Hyper-Themes except Hyper-Theme 4 are directly predictable from the Macro-Theme.

Step 4. Examine the content of the Themes in a paragraph. Does the content of the Themes in each paragraph exhibit a clear line of development for the topic of the paragraph?

For this step, only the main body paragraphs will be analysed.

Paragraph 2:
(7)   Firstly, computer monitoring
(8)   For example, an employer
(9)   The employee
(10)   But in this way [=discouraging employees from chatting or Web surfing during office hours], the employer
(11)   Personal talks or information about the employee
(12)   When using unix to check emails or for other purposes
(13)   Since the use of the Internet is unavoidable
(14)   Otherwise, our use of the Internet

It is not difficult to see that the recurrent topical elements among the themes in this paragraph are "employer" and

"employee". From this, we can see that the development of this paragraph relies on the exemplication (signalled by the textual theme or transition "for example") of what the employer and the employee are doing in order to show how computer monitoring affects privacy. So in general, this paragraph has a very clear line of development and is thus considered a coherent paragraph, at least from the perspective of thematic development.

Paragraph 3:
(15) Secondly, cookies
(16) Cookies
(17) In other words, cookies
(18) Hence if they [=cookies] are not deleted
(19) Therefore, our use of the Internet

In this third paragraph, four out of five topical themes are "cookies", so there is no doubt this paragraph is going to be about "cookies" as one of the means of privacy intrusion, thus meeting the reader's expectation for the development of this paragraph. An examination of the textual themes or transitions shows that the writer is explaining what cookies are ("in other words") and what they can do to affect our privacy ("hence", "therefore").

Paragraph 4:
(20) Thirdly, the Internet
(21) The search engine
(22) People's personal profile or confidential information
(23) In this way [=people's personal profile or confidential information being obtainable through the search engine], any one

This is a short paragraph with only four themes. Two of the themes (21 and 23) are related to "search engine", the "what" element, and one of them has to do with the "how" element (signalled by "in this way"). So the paragraph can still be regarded as having a consistent line of development.

Paragraph 5:
(24) Lastly, hacking
(25) Hacking
(26) Hackers

(27) In life

(28) As the hackers gained from hacking

In this fifth paragraph, four of the five themes are to do with either "hacking" or "hackers", obviously concerned with the "what" element of the topic.

General comment

Student A's essay is, in general, a coherent essay with a clear and explicit Macro-Theme, which directly predicts and is realised by four equally clear and explicit Hyper-Themes (except for one). The thematic choice in the four main body paragraphs also fits well with the expectation of the reader for the development of the Hyper-Themes and the Macro-Theme.

Thematic analysis of Student B's essay

Step 1. Look for a macro-theme

Student B's essay in Table 2 demonstrates that the Macro-Theme of this essay is arguably Sentence 10, which tells the reader that the essay is going to be about "a security problem" of the Internet (a rather vague Macro-Theme in itself) but does not predict a set of hyper-themes in the main body paragraphs.

> Macro-Theme: While connecting computers all around the world as a matrix of network, the Internet also faces a security problem that needs to be solved urgently. (?)[2]

Table 2. Student B's essay

Ever chatted online before? (1) Most young people would say so. (2) Nowadays, with the extensive use of computers and the rapid popularization of the Internet, online chatting has become an indispensable part of many Internet users' daily life. (3) Those Internet addicts, who are always referred to as weboholists, may sometimes even spend the whole day chatting with an unknown party which is located at the other end of the Cyberspace. (4) Some well-known softwares such as Icq, msn and Netmeeting, are specially designed as tools for online chatting and have been frequently utilized. (5) While we are taking

advantage of the convenience the Internet provides, the web also gives rise to a controversial issue related to privacy, a term called online privacy. (6) Nowadays, Internet users' privacy is being intruded upon in various aspects (7) and it has the tendency to become worse. (8) No matter whether one has noticed or not, it is always the truth that there is no absolutely secure method to protect his/her online privacy as soon as he/she log on as an Internet user. (9) Once an Internet user's personal information is stored in the computer, it is already at a risk of been sabotaged or filched mostly while he/she is totally unaware of. (10) While connecting computers all around the world as a matrix of network, the Internet also faces a security problem that needs to be solved urgently.

(11) The right to privacy, i.e. the right of being free from unsanctioned intrusion, has long been the objective that people have been trying to achieve especially in some western countries where individualism is highly appreciated. (12) However, it seems that there is not much consideration about this issue when people are online, giving us an illusion that our online privacy is not as important as our daily privacy. (13) Although there are some differences, the online privacy is also quite substantial and should be treated in the same way. (14) There are hosts of ways to protect your daily privacy, (15) but it is not the case for an Internet user. (16) For example, it is a commonly seen procedure for some registration websites to request for people's personal particulars such as age and marital status in order to give a user approval for using the service provided. (17) It is the truth that sometimes the information about the users is necessary, (18) but to some extent, it has somewhat intruded the users' privacy without considering whether they are willing or not. (19) However, this is not a serious issue since the users are still able to defend themselves by providing fake information about themselves. (20) But when some other factors such as crimes are involved, things would become more complicated.

(21) Ever since the Internet came into being, all kinds of crimes related to computer have also permeated into this undeveloped realm and have been obsessing Internet users by their fatal effect. (22) Hacking, the most frequently used word for computer crime, refers to an illegal act that involves unauthorized access to other people's computers, theft of data or sabotage of information. (23) Once you put some of your private information in your computer, it is no longer private since hackers will easily obtain it by breaking into your computer. (24) Furthermore, for those people who do online banking, there is even a peril that their credit card numbers might be stolen by the hackers. (25) Undoubtedly, computer crime has already become a serious problem regarding the issue of online privacy.

(26) Despite the crimes related to the Internet, there are also some illegitimate softwares that are being widely implemented online. (27) It is said that there is a kind of spyware used to track people's surfing habit

called "cookies". (28) Embedded in some software you download from the web, it usually functions as a net "watcher". (29) It will record the websites you have browsed and will send you back something related to your interest. (30) Although it seems acceptable and reasonable, it violates the rule of privacy in such a way that it didn't get the users' approval in advance. (31) The receivers will feel that what they are doing are all under surveillance and may not act as naturally as how they should. (32) In addition, receiving of unwanted junk mails or what is often called spamming may also happen as a result of the spyware. (33) In spite of the inconvenience caused, the Internet users' privacy is also severely infringed in this way.

(34) Generally, with the tremendous progress of the information technology, people are devoting more of their spare time to the Internet. (35) The commencement of the new Information age brings us an impeccably convenient means of communication on the one hand, but some unavoidable maladies on the other. (36) How to protect our online privacy has already become a serious concern and aroused many web users' attention. (37) However, there is no way that we can make sure that personal privacy will not be intruded upon since nothing can be absolutely secure. (38) In this case, what we are able to do is to improve the safety and stability of the Internet and make a better environment for our next generation.

Step 2. Look for hyper-themes

The Hyper-Themes of all the three main body paragraphs in Student B's essay do not seem to be present. Only a close reading may reveal what is being discussed in each of the main body paragraphs.

> Hyper-Theme 1: Similarity between online privacy and offline privacy (?)
> Hyper-Theme 2: Hacking being the source of online privacy intrusion (?)
> Hyper-Theme 3: Illegitimate software such as cookies being the source of online privacy intrusion (?)

Step 3. Decide if the hyper-themes are predictable from the macro-theme

The recovered Hyper-Themes 2 and 3 are arguably predictable from the Macro-Theme as they are concerned about security problems.

But Hyper-Theme 1 does not seem to be so predictable, and may be taken as a background paragraph.

Step 4. Examine the content of the Themes in a paragraph. Does the content of the Themes in each paragraph exhibit a clear line of development for the topic of the paragraph?

Paragraph 2:

(11) The right to privacy, i.e. the right of being free from unsanctioned intrusion
(12) However, it [seems that there is not much consideration about this issue]
(13) Although there are some differences
(14) There [are hosts of ways to protect your daily privacy]
(15) But it (=there being hosts of ways to protect your daily privacy)
(16) For example, it [is a commonly seen procedure for some registration websites to request for people's personal particulars]
(17) It [is the truth that sometimes the information about the users]
(18) But to some extent, it [=websites requesting people's personal particulars (?)]
(19) However, this [=intruding the users' privacy (?)]
(20) But when some other factors such as crimes are involved

Examining the themes in this paragraph does not give the reader a clear and consistent picture of what the writer is going to write about. There does not seem to be any clear line of development for the topic of the paragraph. This may be attributed to the use of a number of topically empty items such as "it" and "there" (see Martin (1992, 1995) for the discussion of the topical "there"), but even a reconstruction of the topical themes from the rest of the sentence (see below for the list) is seemingly unable to yield a coherent picture of what the writer is going to write about. In other words, not a single theme is dominantly present throughout the paragraph.

right to privacy → this issue [right to privacy?] → differences [between online and offline privacy] → ways [to

protect privacy] → ways [to protect privacy] → websites requesting users' personal particulars → information about the users → websites requesting users' personal particulars → intruding users' privacy (?) → other factors

From the above list, the writer shifts from one theme to another with about seven distinct themes in a ten-sentence paragraph, thus contributing to the reader's impression of the incongruence of topic development for this paragraph.

Paragraph 3:
(21) Ever since the Internet came into being
(22) Hacking
(23) Once you put some of your private information in your computer
(24) Furthermore, for those people who do online banking
(25) Undoubtedly, computer crime

Again, there is seemingly no dominant theme pattern for this third paragraph, with the topic of each theme different from that of another.

Paragraph 4:
(26) Despite the crimes related to the Internet
(27) It [is said that there is a kind of spyware]
(28) Embedded in some software you download from the web
(29) It (=cookies?)
(30) Although it (=cookies recording the websites you have browsed ...) seems acceptable and reasonable
(31) The receivers
(32) In addition, receiving of unwanted junk mails or what is often called spamming
(33) In spite of the inconvenience caused

In this fourth paragraph, the same problem exists: no clear line of development. Only the "cookies" theme can be a potential dominant theme for this paragraph, but most of these themes such as in Sentences 27, 28, 29, 30, and perhaps 32 are only marginally linked to this "dominant" theme, but not without the considerable effort of recovery and interpretation on the part of the reader.

General comment

Student B's essay suffers incoherence on the basis of thematic analysis, exhibited by a rather inexplicit Macro-Theme and three Hyper-Themes which are unclear and difficult to recover for the reader. The thematic choice in the three main body paragraphs also seems erratic for the development of the topic for each paragraph.

CONCLUSION

This paper uses a four-step procedure to analyse the themes of an essay in order to determine the status of its coherence on the levels of both paragraphs and the whole essay. This procedure for thematic analysis is deliberately made simple so that ESL or EFL writers may be able to use in the analysis of their writing.

This tool has yet to undergo extensive testing, but a trial on a small number of students looks positive. One of the students who underwent the experiment told me that this experience taught him a lot about writing and that he began to appreciate what coherence was and to know how to construct an organised and coherent essay in a more conscious way. If this comment is true of many more students, this self-revision tool of thematic analysis should then be applicable in teaching writing to ESL or EFL learners of English.

Coherence is only one of the many important elements contributing to the writing of a good essay. Thus, the method of analysis presented in this paper should not be regarded as providing a panacea for all writing problems. It can, nonetheless, be a useful tool for ESL or EFL student writers to sort and develop their ideas more consistently and coherently in their essays. This type of analysis may also be useful for teachers of writing. It can form the basis for providing more objective feedback to students about aspects of local and global coherence in their writing.

Notes

1. For those who have no expertise in this area, an easy alternative for the identification of the Theme would be to use Berry's (1995: 64) method by treating as Theme "everything that precedes the verb of the main clause." Although this criterion may conflate the Theme, it does not lead to very different analyses in most cases (Hasan & Fries, 1995).

2. The question mark at the end means that the writer of this paper doubts whether the sentence can be taken as the Macro-Theme for the essay. But as the sentence is the most possible candidate for the Macro-Theme, it is taken as such.

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