Thematization in Advanced EFL English

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Abstract

This study hypothesizes that thematization devices are sources of difficulty to the Arab learner. Fronting-devices, i.e. the ways of bringing different elements to the front position, or the placement of the tonic syllable, i.e. the syllable singled out for attention because of its importance as bearing new information escape the attention of advanced Arab learners.

There is a tendency for an Arab learner to focus attention on each word or phrase. A word that is 'singled out for attention' as being important is often missed.

The objectives of this study are the following:

(i)   to measure students' ability to recognize English thematizing patterns

(ii) to highlight the importance of grammatical structures that are underplayed in grammar textbooks

(iii) determine the effect of L1 thematization processes on corresponding L2 processes

(iv) pinpoint sources of difficulty attributed to different focusing processes in conversational exchange

A test comprising 30 sentences in which certain elements were thematized and recorded by an English RP speaker were presented to 120 advanced L2 students. They were **asked** to circle the words that the speaker chose to highlight or focus attention on. Each sentence was repeated twice to ensure students' appropriate reception. Results show that variation of word order and its concomitant effect on how the information is presented is not very well-known to the advanced Arab learner of English. Less well known is the relevance of tonic variation to the development of conversational exchange.

Keywords: thematic devices, focusing process, Arab learners, difficulty

1. Introduction

1.1 Definition of Terms: Theme vs Rheme; Subject vs. Predicate

In this study the term 'theme' is taken to mean 'the point of departure' in the information unit or clause of which the other element is the Rheme. (Halliday 1985: 38). It is first experiential element in a clause (process, participant, or circumstance) + any element(s) preceding it; the peg on which the message is hung". The choice of the theme is important because it is the element that sets up a context for the clause as message. A distinction is drawn between **Subject**, a syntactic category of clause structure of which the other elements are Predicator, Complements, Objects and Adjuncts and ***theme*** which is an element in thematic structure of which, as we have mentioned, the other element is Rheme.

1.2 The Theme System

The theme system basically consists of two terms: (i) *marked* and (ii) *unmarked*. The distinction is based on the choice between different ways of arranging the basic chunks of the message in order of prominence. In English, theme is realized by the first clause constituent. It is *unmarked* when there is a 1:1 correspondence between the expected element such as Subject, Verb, Object and the point of departure of the message. It is *marked* when an ingredient of the message occupies an unusual position in order to give it greater prominence. The thematic portion may have three different theme types:

1. Textual Theme. Conjunctives, Continuatives , Conjunctive Adjuncts, Wh- relatives

2. Interpersonal Theme, e.g. Vocatives, Modal Adjuncts, Finite elements, Wh-question words

3. Topical Theme: participant, Circumstance, Process

1.3 Thematic Devices

The notion of theme and how it is realized in English is an area where grammatical structure and spoken discourse seem most closely allied. Variation in clause structure is a fundamental part of the way we express our thoughts and it enables us to understand those of others. English is often called an SVO language, in contrast with Arabic which is often called a VSO, in that the declarative clause requires a ***verb*** to start with, a subject at the centre and an object after it. In both languages this pattern is often recast: the basic clause constituents may be rearranged so that some elements of clause structure which typically occur in medial or final position in the structure of the clause are positioned initially. The element that occurs in the initial position is the theme, and the different ways used to make some element initial are called *thematization devices*.

2. Fluent Non Fluent Advanced Learners

There are two types of advanced Jordanian learners of English:

(i) Fluent Learners and (ii) Non-fluent Learners. These are distinguished on proficiency levels across all language skills. A fluent learner can predict the sequencing of ideas that will follow

in discourse, whereas the non-fluent speaker cannot make this prediction, and is therefore decoding in arrears of actual utterance, which slows down and makes more complex the rate and nature of the resulting comprehension. In contrast with the fluent learner who accepts concepts and ideas expressed by familiar language forms, the non-fluent learner finds language forms a barrier between himself and the ideas which he must get through in order to learn.

Concepts and ideas are carried in and by language in a variety of complex ways; a complex of interdependent systems of lexis, syntax and discourse. These systems are integrated both structurally and functionally by systems of cohesion and coherence. For the non-fluent speaker each system presents particular problems of discourse.

Most advanced Arab learners, when learning the grammar of English, spend time assimilating the 'flat structure' of clauses in English, where subjects, objects and adverbials are placed in relation to the verb. The sentences chosen for analysis are 'thematically marked'. Variation of word order and its concomitant effect on how the information is presented is not very well-known to the advanced Arab learner of English. Less well known is the relevance of tonic variation to the development of communication.

3. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are the following:

(v) to measure students' ability to recognize English thematizing patterns

(vi) to highlight the importance of grammatical structures that are underplayed in grammar textbooks

(vii) determine the effect of L1 thematization processes on corresponding L2 processes

(viii) pinpoint sources of difficulty attributed to different focusing processes in conversational exchange

4. Method of Study

This study assumes that thematization devices are sources of difficulty to the advanced Arab learner. Fronting-devices, i.e. the ways of bringing different elements to the front position, or the placement of the tonic syllable, i.e. the syllable singled out for attention because of its importance as bearing new information escape the attention of advanced Arab learners. There is a tendency for an Arab learner to focus attention on each word or phrase. A word that is 'singled out for attention' as being important is often missed. In order to corroborate initial observation and provide a method for studying the problem, 30 sentences which represent types of variation in word order have been recorded by an English RP speaker at the recording sound proof room of the Language Centre – the University of Jordan. The native RP speaker's attention was drawn to the key word in each sentences. Key orientation features, e.g. time or place markers, objects, compliments are fronted, i.e placed in initial positions in some sentences, while other items are singled out for attention by a change of pitch movement and prominence to highlight its role in creating a theme in the sentence recording.

The test comprising the 30 recorded sentences were presented to two groups of advanced learners of English at Petra University, Amman. The first group consists of 10 fluent speakers who speak English in a near native fluency. They lived and were educated part of their pre-university education in the United Sates or Great Britain.. Asked to rate themselves on a self-assessment scale on the 4 language skills, they all rated themselves as "Excellent". For the purposes of this study and because of their high proficiency, they were considered ' the Control Group'. The second group consists of 70 non-fluent advanced learners who passed the English Proficiency Exam. They follow a required university English course for instrumental purposes (i.e. uses for English rather than for learning language as such. Students were asked to rate their present ability in the four main language skills on a 4 point scale: Excellent, Very Good, Average and Below Average. The majority of students in the second group rated themselves as basically of "average" or "below average" ability in reading, writing and speaking. For the listening skill, (43%) considered themselves to be "average"/very good". On separate occasions, groups of students were asked to circle the words or words that the speaker chose to highlight or focus attention on. Each sentence was repeated twice to ensure students' appropriate reception.

5. Results and Discussion

Figure 1 below shows the percentage of correct responses for the highlighted items meant to realize the theme or the point of departure in the clause. The pitch accented items represent thematic elements whether they are marked, i.e. occur in less typical or frequent position than expected or *unmarked*, ie. they occur in the most frequent positions in the structure of the sentence. Test sentences containing *'marked'* themes below are 'topical', not textual or interpersonal.
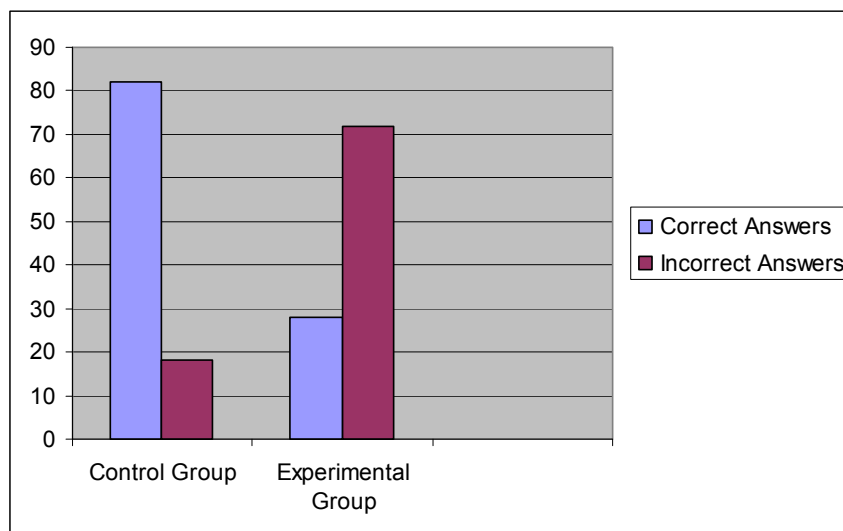

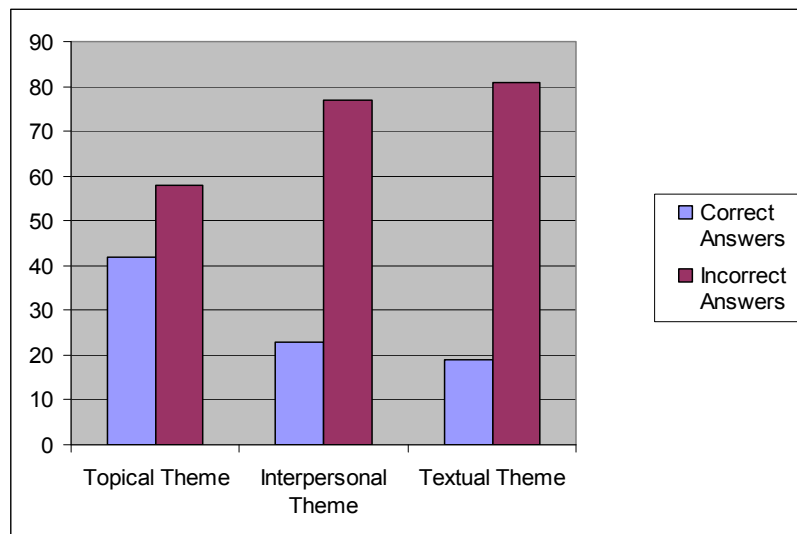Figure 1. Correct Vs Incorrect Answers for both Groups

Figure 2. Theme Types percentages for both Groups

The two groups were found to differ quite considerably on the identification of The thematic portion. Whereas the fluent speakers circled correctly the pitch accented *marked* topical themes (90 %), the non-fluent speakers experienced difficulty in locating the highlighted thematic portions. Fluent speakers were able to recognize the effect of a shifting tonic syllable on the meaning of an utterance. Many Non fluent speakers (40 %) , unaware of the subtleties of variations of grammatical processes of fronting and variation in accent, whether of stress or pitch, failed to locate the thematic portion. To reach a high standard of intelligibility and of ease of communication, an advanced learner's training in the use of thematic devices is therefore decisive. Failures to indicate correctly the important information point in the message ' i.e. the theme may be due to one more of the following factors:

6. Factors Responsible for Lower Percentages

6.1 Difference in Structural Options

English is SVO language in that the declarative clause requires a Subject in initial position followed by a Verb at the center and any Object or Complement in final position. In contrast with English Arabic syntactic structures fall into two major divisions: (i) verbal clauses which require a Verb in initial position followed by a Noun e.g (?ana) baHibb maama ' I *love mummy'* and (ii) nominal sentences characterized by the absence of a verbal element , e.g. ?ana Hurr " I (am) free. In terms of the obligatory elements operating in the structure of the clause, Quirk & Greenbaum (1979) recognize seven clause types: SVA, SVC, SVO, SVOA, SVOC, SVOO, SV, where S stands for Subject, V for Verb, O for Object, and for Adverb. Arabic basic clause-types have not yet been established. Referring to data in child language acquisition, one finds the following recurring structural patterns

Table 1. NP- Vimp - NP- PP (NP=Noun Phrase, V=Verb, PP=Prep. Phrase

NP	*Vimp*	NP	(Adjunct)	'Translation'
?ana	?akalt	ruzz/ labaneh/ beeD		*'I ate rice/ labaneh/ eggs'*
?ana	xawwft	-uh		*'I scared him'*
	Šribit	ħaliib		*'I drank milk'*

The table describes the sequence of structure elements of a simple declarative sentence.

Table 2. (Noun Phrase, V=Verb, PP= Prepositional phrase)

NP	V-b	V	PP	Translation
?inteh	btiʕrif	tʕidd	lalʕaŠara?	*'Do you know how to count up to ten?'*
?inti	biddik	DDalli	hon?	*'Do you want to stay here?'*
?inti	btiʕirfi	tlabsiini		*'Do you know how to dress me up?'*

The above table describes the sequence of structural elements typical of an interrogative sentence.

Table 3. (NP = Noun Phrase. Adj = Adjective)

NP	Adj	translation
?ana	za9laan	*'I am cross'*
humme	ta9baneen	*'They are tired'*

Table 4. displays sentence patterns of structure Noun Phrase +Adjective

NP (N/Pr/Det)	N (Adj)- N construct	English Translation
haadi	makinat Hilaaqa(h)	*'This is a shaving machine'*
haaadi	muknisit kahraba	

Table 5. (NP= Noun Phrase, Vp = Verb Phrase, + Adjunct)

NP	VP	adjunct	Translation
Issafiina(h)	waSalat	(?ams)	*'The ship arrived yesterday'*
issayyaarah	xaribat		*'the car broke down'*

Table 5 describes the sequence of structural elements Noun Phrase,Verb Phrase followed by an Adjunct

Table 6. (fii = 'a dummy word + there is, NP= Noun Phrase, + an Adjunct)

fii	NP	adjunct	Translation
fii	laHm xaruuf	fi al-θallaaja(h)	*; There is lamb in the fridge*
fii	waaHad	9albaab	*'There is somebody on the door'*

The table describe the occurrence of the dummy word "fii" 'there is' followed by a noun phrase and an adjunct.

Although there is a high degree of mobility in the occurrence of one element

in place of another in the structure of Arabic basic structural patterns, differences arising from absence of verbal elements in nominal sentences and differences in pitch accent placement are contributing factors to failures of intelligibility and ease of communication.

7. The Role of Stress in English Discourse:

It is generally recognized that stress in English has two roles of immediate clarification: (i) it reinforces formal structural features of an utterance, e.g. The distinction between say Long and Short syllables, reduction of vowel quality in unstressed syllables and (ii) it clarifies implicit content, e.g. exhibiting the relative importance of information points.

A learner who fails to give prominence to stressable syllables, or he makes little use of the distinction between function and content words slows down the rate and alters the quality of learning.

7.1 The Tonic Syllable

The use of stress is closely related to intonation. Within utterances, certain syllables are selected and emphasized by a change of pitch movement in order to highlight the most important new information.

Interlocutors make certain assumptions with regard to what is old and what is new information, and express these by *tonicity*. The placement of the tonic syllable in words is a source of difficulty to the non- fluent learner of English, as it is an essential device in L2 used to focus attention and interest in the message conveyed.

7.2. Influence of Arabic Stress Rules

Although Jordanian Arabic is recognized as 'a stress-timed' or isochronous language in that stresses occur at more or less intervals of time , oral discourse nevertheless exhibits a tendency for monotony. Reading Arabic or listening to English broadcast bulletins over the radio provides numerous examples of inadequacy in clarifying content. This is due, in the main, to errors in the distribution of tone groups, inappropriate prominence of function words as opposed to content words, and above all failure to highlight lexical exponents**.**

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APPENDIX 1: TEST ITEMS PERCENTAGES

. Test Item	Cor.	Inc.	Per cent	Thematised elements
1. Smoking, I hate it.	10	0	100%	fronted OD(topical)
2. It's **spaghettis** that I'm very fond of.	10	0	100	Cleft (topical)
3.. She reads **'The Jordan Times'**, Sabrina	10	0	100	OD (topical)
4. Joyce, she reads 'The Guardian'.	10	0	100	S (topical)
5. Last night **someone** parked a large van outside our front door.	05	05	50	S (topical)
6.Rich they may be, but I don't think they're happy.	10	0	100	C (topical)
7.**What** Joyce reads is the Guardian	10	0	100	Wh-Rel.(textual)
8. Sometimes Joyce reads the Jordan Times.	**10**	**0**	**100**	mood.Adj.(interpersonal)
9. The bride **and** the groom left early last night.	02	08	80	Conjunction(textual)
10. The cat was patted on **the head** by John.	10	0	100	(topical)
11. Ice cream, that's the pudding I like best in the world.	**10**	**0**	**100**	C (topical)
12. Up goes the balloon.	**10**	**0**	**100**	Modal Adjunct(interpersonal)
13. Never have I seen such a sight.	**09**	**01**	**90**	Mood adjunct (interpersonal)
14. You'll never have a better chance.	**09**	**01**	**90**	Participant (topical)
15. Frankly, he was driving on the wrong side of the road.	**06**	**04**	**60**	Comment adunct ((interpersonal)
16. Whatever you do, **don't** forget the plane tickets.	10	0	100	Finite element (interpersonal)
17. To cure stress, try a **Jacuzz**i bath.	10	0	100	OD (topical)
18. There goes my **last** dollar.	09	01	90	OD (topical)
19. Should you decide to change your mind, **please** let me know.	10	0	100	Comment adjunct(interpersonal)
20. Well now Mrs. Jones **what** can **I** do for you?	10	0	100	Wh-word (interpersonal)
21. Buy a **new** car.	10	0	100	Od (topical)
22. Definitely, he will cancel the meeting.	**10**	**0**	**100**	Mood adunct(interpersonal)
23. Do **you** like herbal tea?	10	0	100	Finite element(interpersonal)
24. Put **out** the light, I said	10	0	100	Adjunct(interpersonal)

25. But there was **nothing** I could do about it.	10	0	100	Cs (topical)
26. Bob his name is	**10**	**0**	**100**	Cs (topical**)**
27. Inflation you call it.	**10**	**0**	**100**	Co (topical)
28. Quite **noisy** the party became in the end.	09	01	90	Cs (topical)
29. All these red roses**, who** can have sent them?	07	03	70	Wh-Q-word (interpersonal)
30. However hard he tries, **he** won't be able to win the race	06	04	60	S (topical)

2. Experimental Group: Non-Fluent Speakers: N=70

. Test Item	Cor.	Inc.	Per Cent %	Thematised elements
1. Smoking, I hate it.	**38**	**32**	**54**	fronted OD(topical)
2. It's **spaghettis** that I'm very fond of.	46	24	66	Cleft (topical)
3..She reads **'The Jordan Times'**, Sabrina	48	22	69	OD (topical)
4.Joyce, she reads 'The Guardian'.	**28**	**42**	**40**	S (topical)
5. Last night **someone** parked a large van outside our front door.	10	60	14	S (topical)
6. Rich they may be, but I don't think they're happy.	**32**	**38**	**46**	C (topical)
7. What Joyce reads is the Guardian	37	43	53	Wh-Rel.(textual)
8. Sometimes Joyce reads the Jordan Times.	**31**	**39**	**44**	mood.Adj.(interpersonal)
9. The bride **and** the groom left early last night.	04	66	06	Conjunction(textual)
10. The cat was patted on **the head** by John.	17	53	24	(topical0
11. Ice cream, that's the pudding I like best in the world.	**48**	**22**	**69**	C (topical)
12. Up goes the balloon.	33	**37**	**47**	Modal Adjunct(interpersonal)
13. Never have I seen such a sight.	34	**36**	**49**	Mood adjunct (interpersonal)
14. You'll never have a better chance.	**12**	**58**	**17**	Participant (topical)
15. Frankly, he was driving on the wrong side of the road.	12	**58**	**17**	Comment adunct ((interpersonal)

16. Whatever you do, **don't** forget the plane tickets.	16	54	23	Finite element (interpersonal)
17. To cure stress, try a **Jacuzz**i bath.	32	38	46	OD (topical)
18. There goes my **last** dollar.	27	43	39	OD (topical)
19. Should you decide to change your mind, **please** let me know.	31	39	44	Comment adjunct(interpersonal)
20. Well now Mrs. Jones **what** can **I** do for you?	08	62	11	Wh-word (interpersonal)
21. Buy a **new** car.	20	50	29	Od (topical)
22. Definitely, he will cancel the meeting.	**33**	**37**	**47**	Mood adunct(interpersonal)
23. Do you **like** herbal tea?	12	58	17	Finite element(interpersonal)
24. Put **ou**t the light, I said	17	53	24	Adjunct(interpersonal)
25. But there was **nothing** I could do about it.	35	35	50	Cs (topical)
26. Bob his name is	**36**	**34**	**80**	Cs (topical**)**
27. Inflation you call it.	**47**	**23**	**67**	Co (topical)
28. Quite **noisy** the party became in the end.	23	47	33	Cs (topical)
29. All these red roses**, who** can have sent them?	20	50	29	Wh-Q-word (interpersonal)
30. However hard he tries, **he** won't be able to win the race	05	65	07	S (topical)

Appendix 2: Recorded Test Items

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Theme/Rheme Exercise

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Look at the following example:

Example: She prefers a cup of *herbal tea,* Salma

If we look at the example from the point of view of how the information in it is presented, we can see that the speaker seems to be saying something about '*herbal tea'* rather than about 'Salma'. '*Herbal tea'* is that part of the sentence on which attention is focused. Items highlighted in this way we shall call *the theme* So, we draw a circle around **'***herbal tea'***.**

The 'theme 'is what we are concerned about in the following exercise.

Listen to each of the following sentences. Circle the word or words you think the speaker chose to highlight or focus on.

1. Smoking, I hate it.

2. It's spaghettis that I'm very fond of.

3. She reads 'The Jordan Times', Sabrina

4. Joyce, she reads 'The Guardian'.

5. Last night someone parked a large van outside our front door.

6. Rich they may be, but I don't think they're happy.

7. What Joyce reads is the Guardian

8. Sometimes Joyce reads the Jordan Times.

9. The bride and the groom left early last night.

10. The cat was patted on the head by John.

11. Ice cream, that's the pudding I like best in the world.

12. Up goes the balloon.

13. Never have I seen such a sight.

14. You'll never have a better chance.

15. Frankly, he was driving on the wrong side of the road.

16. Whatever you do, don't forget the plane tickets.

17. To cure stress, try a Jacuzzi bath.

18. There goes my last dollar.

19. Should you decide to change your mind, please let me know.

20. Well now Mrs. Jones what can I do for you?

21. Buy a new car.

22. Definitely, he will cancel the meeting.

23. Do you like herbal tea?

24. Put out the light, I said

25. But there was nothing I could do about it.

26. Bob his name is

27. Inflation you call it.

28. Quite noisy the party became in the end.

29. All these red roses, who can have sent them?

30. However hard he tries, he won't be able to win the race.

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