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Thematic analysis in selected reading passages of English for tourism textbooks for university students in Indonesia: From a systemic functional linguistic perspective

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ABSTRACT

English for Tourism textbooks play a crucial role in developing students' language skills for the tourism industry. Among the various components of these textbooks, reading passages are particularly important for exposing learners to authentic language use and thematic structures. This study aims to investigate how thematic analysis is used in selected reading passages in an English for tourism and hospitality textbook. The study is grounded in the textual meta-function within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). A qualitative content analysis approach was employed to examine thematic structures. The data consisted of 500 clauses taken from 13 passages in the textbook of English for Hotel and Tourism. From the analysis, it was found that two primary types of theme structures used in the textbook include simple and multiple themes. The simple themes (ST) are realized through the topical theme at the beginning of the clause. The multiple themes (MT) are represented through the combination of textual ^ and topical elements, often marked by conjunctions. In terms of markedness of Theme, the variations in the theme were found, including Unmarked Simple Theme (UST), Unmarked Multiple Theme (UMT), and Marked Simple Theme (MST). The variation of the theme helps in organizing the flow of information. The changing of the Theme position (marked or unmarked) can be a sign of important content in focus in the passage.

KEYWORDS: reading passage, SFL, textbook, theme, tourism

1. Introduction

Tourism is a key site for the linguistic commodification of authenticity, destabilizing discourses that link languages to cultures, identities, nations and states (Heller et al., 2014; Heriyanto et al., 2018). It can be understood as a macro-level specialized discourse that encompasses a wide range of specialized languages, corresponding to the various disciplines and subdisciplines it engages with (Maci, 2018). In Indonesia, it plays a crucial role in promoting national identity and enhancing the tourist experience.

The language of tourism serves as a tool of social control in various contexts. It ranges from promotional materials to hotels and resorts (Hitchcock & Dann, 1998). Furthermore, the language of tourism has emerged as a distinct field within languages for specific purposes requiring ongoing learning by practitioners and tourists alike (Chiwanga, 2014; Ruiz-Garrido & Saorín-Iborra, 2012), as well as the understanding of how tourism operates, and how perceptions and identities are formed (Irimiea, 2018).

English plays a crucial role in Indonesia's tourism industry, serving as a key factor in supporting its overall success (Sagala, 2023). To accommodate this, the department or study program of tourism or hospitality incorporates English for Tourism or English for Hospitality in their curriculum. This makes sense since improving English communication skills is crucial for the development of Indonesia's tourism industry and economy (Damayanti, 2019; Widiastuti et al., 2021). The teacher or lecturer should understand the characteristics of language used in tourism before teaching students. Moreover, in teaching English, well-structured English textbooks are fundamental components that support learners in developing the language skills they need.

English for Tourism and Hospitality (ETH) textbooks play a crucial role in developing students' language skills for the tourism industry. Textbook analysis has emerged as a critical focus in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) research, as these materials are key elements in language programs (Reswari, 2019). In the textbook of ETH, some parts represent those four skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing. To examine the reading passages, this study employs through the lens of textual function.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), pioneered by M.A.K Halliday, recognizes three metafunctions of language: interpersonal, ideational, and textual function. Textual function is also known as a clause as a message (Eggins, 2004; Fatmawati et al., 2019; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Saragih, 2006; Yusuf et al., 2021). In addition, it organizes ideational and interpersonal meanings to create relevant text (Bartlett & O'Grady, 2017) and encodes both meanings into a coherent flow of information (Alves & Jakobsen, 2020). Moreover, SFL provides models for analyzing textual meaning beyond the clause, including discourse semantics and the relationship between text and social context (Martin, 2002).

Textual Function is represented through the representation of Theme-Rheme. The Theme is the departure of the message, while the Rheme is the rest of the clause. The system of theme can be categorized into some parts (Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). It covers the choice of type of Theme, whether marked or unmarked, and whether predicated or unpredicated theme. This study focuses on two aspects: the choice of type of theme, and the markedness of theme. The system of theme is described in the following figure
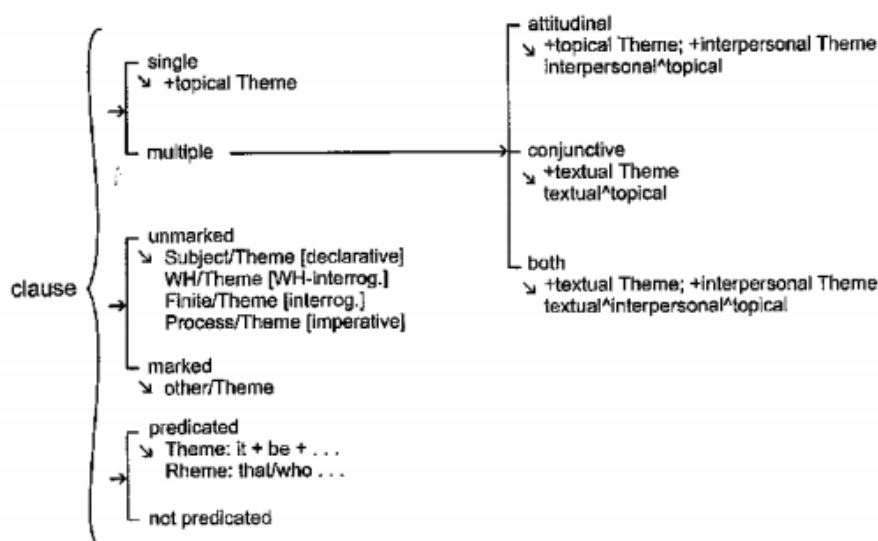

Figure 1. The System of Theme (Eggins, 2004)

The previous studies on thematic analysis have been conducted by several scholars including in news text (Hidayah et al., 2023; Humaizi & Yusuf, 2024b, 2024a; Nurlela et al., 2024), presidential speech (Kusumawardani & Putra, 2021), in writing (Al-Otaibe, 2021; Hanafiah et al., 2018; Meiarista & Widhiyanto, 2020; Wei, 2015; Woo, 2022; Yunita, 2018), research article abstract (Alyousef, 2021), in translation studies (Dejica-Cartis & Cozma, 2013), song (Dewi, 2017), diplomatic text (Rahardjo et al., 2021), and brochure (Yanthi & Umiyati, 2018). The analysis of textbook was done including through interpersonal function (Achsan & Sofwan, 2016), readability (Bahrudin, 2016; Dewantara et al., 2022; Gultom & Pintubatu, 2022; Ramadhan et al., 2017; Ramadhani et al., 2023; Rizkiani et al., 2022; To, 2017, 2018; To et al., 2013; Waruwu et al., 2019), ecolinguistics (Mliless & Larouz, 2018), English reading materials (Kuswoyo, 2023), cultural-based English text (Handayani & Aprilliandari, 2022), and text complexity (Putra & Lukmana, 2017). Meanwhile, the textbook analysis deals with tourism has been conducted (Ban et al., 2017; Hamdani et al., 2022; Oktarin et al., 2019; Prachanant, 2012; Safitri, 2020; Syahid et al., 2024). Despite the growing importance of ETH in higher education in Indonesia, studies analyzing the textual meaning of tourism textbooks from a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) perspective remain scarce. While previous research has often focused on ideational and interpersonal meanings, the exploration of textual meaning how information is organized, developed, and made coherent within texts has been largely overlooked. This study is urgent and necessary to address the gap, as understanding textual meaning is crucial for ensuring that tourism textbooks effectively support students' comprehension and professional communication skills. This research is expected to contribute to the improvement of textbook design and teaching practices, ultimately enhancing the quality of English education in tourism programs across Indonesia.

Analyzing the Theme in reading passages of ETH textbooks is essential because it reveals how information is structured to achieve specific communicative goals relevant to the tourism industry. Tourism texts are not purely informational; they often serve persuasive, instructional, and descriptive purposes aimed at preparing students for real-world communication with guests, clients, and stakeholders. Based on the background stated previously, this study aims to explore the realization of Thematic patterns and Thematic complexity in the reading passages of ETH textbooks for university students in Indonesia.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach to investigate the textual organization of reading passages in an ETH textbook, with a particular focus on the textual function as outlined in the SFL perspective. The analysis was grounded in the Hallidayan model of textual analysis, which emphasizes the role of Theme and Rheme in structuring meaning within clauses. The data for this study consisted of 500 clauses, which were extracted from 13 reading passages taken from a textbook titled "English for Hotel and Tourism".

The book can be downloaded freely and authored by Rahmat Wisudawanto & Eka Susylowati (2022). The selection of passages was based on their relevance to key tourism topics and their representativeness of different text types commonly found in tourism discourse, such as descriptive, procedural, and promotional texts. Each clause was identified and segmented based on clause boundaries, and then analyzed for its Thematic structure, including Topical Theme, Textual Theme, and Interpersonal Theme, following Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) classification.

The analysis was conducted manually, with each clause categorized according to its Theme type and the position of the Theme within the clause. This process involved identifying whether the Theme was marked or unmarked and how the Thematic progression functioned across the passage. The aim was to identify patterns in thematic organization that reflect the communicative goals of tourism texts, such as presenting key information, guiding readers' attention, and enhancing textual cohesion. The results of the analysis were then interpreted to reveal how the textbook models effective discourse practices for learners preparing for roles in the tourism industry.

3. Results and Discussion

A. Types of Theme

In SFL, Theme is a key element of the clause as a message, indicating what the clause is about the starting point of the message. The system of Theme in SFL highlights the choice of type of Theme. The findings reveal that both topical Theme and textual Theme are found in the data.

1. Topical Theme

The Topical Theme refers to the first experiential element in the clause usually the subject or another experiential participant, process, or circumstance. In the ETH textbook, topical Themes are central to presenting the main ideas and key entities or events that the passage wants to emphasize. Tourism reading passages frequently describe destinations, services, cultural practices, or travel procedures, so topical Themes are where core informational content begins. The example is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Representation of Topical Theme

The transit flights	are only for outbound journeys from Australian cities (Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth, Sydney) as well as New Zealand cities (Auckland and Christchurch).
Participant	
THEME	RHEME
Topical Theme	

In Table 1, the clause contains topical Themes and it is presented through the phrase of "the transit flights". This topical Theme itself is identified and labelled if an element of the clause to which a transitivity function can be assigned occurs in the first position of the clause. The phrase "the transit flights", in the transitivity function, has a status of participant. The topical theme serves as a central and obligatory element in thematic structure of clause. Studies have analyzed Theme-Rheme structures in various texts, finding that TT are often the most prevalent.

2. Textual Theme

Textual Themes (such as conjunctions and continuatives like and, but, so, however, then, etc.) are essential in organizing information within a text. In ETH textbooks, particularly in reading passages, textual Themes are commonly used to ensure coherence and logical flow between clauses, sentences, or paragraphs. Since tourism texts often aim to describe, sequence, or explain processes, writers rely on textual Themes to guide readers through the logical structure of the discourse.

Table 2. The Representation of Textual Theme

While	airport staff working in the holding areas	must use a face mask, face shield and gloves.
THEME		RHEME
Textual Theme	Topical Theme	
Conjunctive Adjunct		

In Table 2, the textual function is presented by the word "while". It represents the status as a conjunctive adjunct, serving as the Theme. The textual Theme functions to connect the clause to the broader context, helping to build coherence and cohesion in the text by signalling the relationship between clauses. Textual Theme facilitates readers the flow of information the writer wants to express by linking clauses and organizing the progression of ideas throughout the text (Himphinit & Astia, 2023; Leong, 2022).

B. Theme Markedness and Its Complexity

In SFL, the distinction between marked and unmarked Theme is crucial for understanding how speakers manage the flow of information. It becomes subjective when drawing attention to certain information by means of markedness (Stoian & Dejica, 2016). The use of marked Themes can scaffold transitions between discourse phases, while unmarked Themes support textual continuity (Moyano, 2016). Theme markedness is defined based on the position of the topical Theme in the clause. When the Theme is not the Subject (in declarative clauses) position, it is regarded as marked. Meanwhile, when the Theme is the Subject (in declarative clauses), it is considered the unmarked Theme. In the data, both marked and unmarked theme were identified, as illustrated in the following table. Regarding whether the Theme is realized in simple or multiple Themes, the variation of the Theme is presented as follows.

Table 3. The Representation of Marked Simple Theme

In comparison,	Changi Airport handled more than 170,000 passengers a day last May,
THEME	RHEME
Topical: marked	

The clause in Table 3 provides the existence of a marked simple Theme. This is categorized as a simple Theme since there is only one Theme in the clause, namely the topical Theme and it is obligatory for every clause. A marked simple Theme occurs when the Theme of a clause is a single element that is not the Subject, making it "marked" due to its unusual placement in the clause. In English declarative sentences, the typical (unmarked) Theme is the Subject; however, when a circumstantial element, such as an adverbial phrase of time, place, or manner, is placed at the beginning of the clause, it creates a marked simple Theme.

Table 4. The Representation of Unmarked Simple Theme

The lane	will be launched in June for essential travel for business and official purposes between the two countries,
THEME	RHEME
Topical: unmarked	

The clause in Table 4 provides the existence of an unmarked simple Theme. This is categorized as a simple Theme since there is only one Theme in the clause, namely topical the Theme "the lane". The status of unmarked is assigned since the sentence is in the declarative mood and it is started by the subject.

Table 5. The Representation of Unmarked Multiple Theme

If	They	were on repatriation flights arranged by their governments.
THEME		RHEME
Textual Theme	Topical Theme: Unmarked	
Conjunctive Adjunct		

In Table 5, multiple Theme was found. It is in the form of a textual Theme ^ Topical Theme. According to Eggins (2004), this type is regarded as a conjunctive. This multiple Theme can be analyzed further by the use of marked or unmarked Topical Theme. The example in Table 5 is a declarative sentence and it is started by the subject, so it is categorized as unmarked.

The Theme in reading passages plays a crucial role in text comprehension and organization. Various types of themes, including simple, multiple, and clausal, are employed across different textbook levels, with simple themes being the most prevalent (To, 2018). Studies have investigated Theme-Rheme structures in various English textbooks, finding that unmarked Theme is the most common (Mahfud et al., 2024). The use unmarked Themes (such as the subject) to present factual and objective information clearly. The variation of Theme in reading passages found in ETH textbooks serves several essential communicative and pedagogical functions. These texts are typically designed not only to convey information but also to simulate authentic language use in professional hospitality settings. One of the primary reasons for Theme variation particularly between marked and unmarked Themes, as well as textual and topical Themes is to structure information in a way that reflects real-world discourse.

4. Conclusion

Based on the analysis, it was found that in terms of thematic patterns, there are two types of themes found including topical, and textual Themes. Meanwhile, related to patterns and their complexity, there are some types including simple Theme, marked simple Theme, unmarked simple Theme, multiple Theme, unmarked multiple Theme, and marked Multiple Theme. In light of the findings, several practical recommendations can be proposed to enhance the pedagogical and material development aspects of ETH instruction in higher education

in Indonesia. Textbook authors and curriculum developers are encouraged to integrate a more balanced and deliberate use of various Theme types and patterns. By incorporating diverse thematic structures such as marked and multiple Themes, authors can enrich the textual complexity of reading passages, thereby fostering students' awareness of how information is structured in authentic tourism discourse. Such integration may also better reflect the thematic progression typically found in real-world tourism materials.

English instructors in tourism programs should be equipped with training on the principles of thematic structure based on SFL. A deeper understanding of how Themes function to organize information and establish cohesion will enable them to guide students more effectively in reading comprehension and text analysis. In particular, they should be able to help students identify and interpret different types of themes (textual, interpersonal, topical) and recognize how markedness in shaping meaning emphasis and organizing textual flow.

Higher education institutions offering English for Tourism should consider aligning curriculum objectives with discourse-based approaches to language instruction. Incorporating textual meaning analysis into reading and writing components will support learners in understanding how language operates at the clause and text levels, especially in professional contexts such as tourism communication, where clarity, coherence, and tone are critical.

It is also recommended that subsequent studies evaluate the impact of thematic instruction on students' reading comprehension and text production. This would provide empirical evidence on the pedagogical effectiveness of integrating Theme analysis into language learning, particularly in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) settings such as tourism.

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