

# Information Structure in Textbook Chapter Introductions: Implications for Instruction of Non-Native Speakers of English

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# Information Structure in Textbook Chapter Introductions: Implications for Instruction of Non-Native Speakers of English

Timothy Stewart

現今英語を意思伝達の言語とする大学では ESL/EFL の授業で生教材を使い、学生が上級の授業に備えられるようにすることが求められている。本論は選択体系機能文法から借用した概念が、上級の授業が理解できるようにするために大学生に英語を教える教師にとって、実際どのように役に立つのかを明らかにするものである。「情報構造—旧情報と新情報—」という概念、及び「主題構造—主題と説述—」という概念を使って標準的な政治学教科書二種の各章の導入部分を検討してみた。本論は広範な研究を短縮したもので、重要な課題が二つある。先ず学部生レベルの教科書でテーマを導入する際に使われる文章の主題構造と情報構造とを明らかにすることがその第一で、次にこれがスキーマ理論及び ESL/EFL 読解教授法関係文献に触れるという意味があるので、この分析の実際の教授法に持つ意味を考えることがその第二である

Currently, ESL/EFL teachers are encouraged to use authentic materials in their classes as a way to prepare their students for academic programs in English-medium universities. This article illustrates how concepts borrowed from systemic functional grammar might be of practical use to teachers in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs. The concepts of *Information structure* - Given and New information - and *Thematic structure* - Theme and Rheme (Halliday, 1994) are employed in an examination of the introductions to chapters in two standard political science textbooks. This truncated version of a larger study has two overriding aims. The first is to expose the Thematic and Information structure of the discourse used to introduce topics in undergraduate textbooks. The second aim is to consider the practical pedagogical implications of this analysis as it relates to the literature on schema theory and ESL/EFL reading pedagogy.

## Introduction

Non-native speakers of English are entering English-medium university classrooms worldwide in unprecedented numbers. Teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are charged with preparing these students for university classes. So it is that ESL/EFL teachers are encouraged today to use authentic materials and to enable authentic communication in their classrooms. The term "authentic materials" usually means those produced for native speakers. At the undergraduate college level, these will most likely be textbooks. For teachers of non-native speakers, the selection of materials can be crucial. Is "authentic" always best? Are some authentic materials better for ESL/EFL students than others? The answer to the latter question, of course, is yes. Yet how do language teachers make these decisions?

The analysis of discourse is central to English for Academic Purposes (EAP). This paper explores how structuralist analysis might be used to evaluate the appropriateness of textbook chapters for ESL/EFL learners. More specifically, the analysis is conducted using the concepts of *Information* and *Thematic structure*. These concepts will be explained in the method section.

This brief account is a shortened version of a larger study. It will examine the introductions to chapters in two political science textbooks. Two standard university textbooks for introductory courses in political science were selected for this study. The two textbooks are in their sixth and seventh editions respectively. Each is between 400 and 500 pages in 18 and 20 chapters. The introduction to one chapter will be examined in each of these textbooks.

The objectives of this study are two-fold. The first is to explore the Thematic and Information structure of the discourse used to introduce topics to students taking introductory political science courses. Second, I consider the possible instructional implications of this analysis as it relates to the literature on schema theory and ESL/EFL reading pedagogy (see Carrell, Devine, & Eskey, 1988). That is, do these texts provide enough introductory information to the chapter topics, and do they potentially build upon the schema of non-native English speaking students who might take courses in which these texts are used? More specifically, this paper attempts to reveal implications for instructing ESL/EFL students who would make use of these texts in university classes.

## Background

Genres have been defined as a group or class of texts that share a specific communicative function. This function, according to Holmes (1997), "tends to produce distinctive structural patterns" (p. 322). Further, Swales informs us that "exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience" (1990, p. 58). In light of this comment by Swales, this paper investigates whether an ESL/EFL audience would be well-served by the introductory texts for political science students selected for this study. As they are extracted from political science textbooks, we can classify these texts as subject-area or expository texts.

While the research article has been given detailed study (e.g., Crookes, 1986; Dudley-Evans & Henderson, 1990; Swales, 1990), textbooks are an important source for much instruction in university courses, particularly in the first two years of undergraduate programmes. Course textbooks have features that can be analyzed to determine how challenging they would be for readers to comprehend. Guthrie (1981) argues that assigned texts are readable when: vocabulary is readily learnable; sentences are coherent so that new information is easily connected with prior knowledge; question and review exercises are appropriate; content is presented in the form of principles with examples and illustrations; and, length is limited to student time available.

Singer and Donlan (1989) describe seven categories to determine how reader-friendly a text is. Their categories are: text organization, cohesion, explication, conceptual density, metadiscourse, writeability, and instructional design. Anderson and Armbruster (1984) coined the concepts of "considerate" and "inconsiderate" text. Considerate texts have a structure that fits the writer's purpose, are well-signaled by cue words, have cohesion and unity of theme and use vocabulary and content that is appropriate for the audience. They claim that inconsiderate texts are a major reason for comprehension failure.

Reading and comprehension from text are not passive activities. Even given considerate or friendly texts, comprehension comes from more than the features or content of a text. "Comprehension is the construction of meaning that results from an interaction between the text's features and the reader's resources" (Singer &

Donlan, 1989, p. 141). It is the features of a text that activate a reader's schemata which are used to draw meaning from a text.

Political Science is a part of the social studies or social sciences. Shepherd (1978) noted that students entering high schools will have difficulty comprehending social studies texts due to their lack of background to understand the concepts. At the tertiary level it is conceivable that non-native speakers of English, especially international students who come from abroad to study, will face similar difficulties comprehending texts written for courses at Australian, British, Canadian and American universities.

## Method

The texts examined in this paper are taken from the sixth edition of *Political Science: An Introduction* (Roskin, Cord, Medeiros & Jones, 1997) and the seventh edition of *Governing: An Introduction to Political Science* (Ranney, 1996). These texts were selected in consultation with a Political Science professor who believes that they are "standard introductory textbooks" in the field. The chapters chosen for analysis are: chapter 5 from Ranney, "Democracy and Authoritarianism: Principles and Models; and, "Democracy, Totalitarianism, and Authoritarianism", chapter 4 from Roskin et al. The chapters were selected because a survey of course syllabi revealed that these topics are normally covered in first-year or introductory courses in Political Science.

I have chosen a structuralist approach to the analysis of the introductions to these chapters. I will examine these chapter introductions and compare their contents through an analysis of clauses in terms of their *Information structure* - Given and New information - and *Thematic structure* - Theme and Rheme. Halliday (1994) uses Theme and Rheme to analyze spoken discourse but these concepts can be applied to written texts as well. Theme is what a speaker or writer chooses as "a point of departure" for his/her message. Given this, the Theme is often stated in the first part of a clause. The remainder of the clause is the Rheme in which the Theme is developed. In short, the Theme combines with the remainder of the clause to create a message. Bloor and Bloor (1995) inform us that comprehension is constructed on the basis of shared or "mutual" knowledge. "This shared information is usually found at the beginning of a clause and is labelled Given information" (Bloor & Bloor, p. 66). Included in most clauses also is information that is the focus of the communication and is considered to be New information. Given information can be assumed, as it is what the reader or listener already knows and, thus, is optional, but New information must be stated in a clause (Bloor & Bloor). Halliday sums up the difference of information and thematic structure this way: "Theme and Rheme is speaker (writer) oriented, while Given and New is listener (reader) oriented" (p. 299).

Only the introductory sections at the beginning of each of the textbook chapters selected for this study will be analyzed. That is, the focus of the analysis is the general information introducing the topic of each chapter. Chapter sections containing specific information about political ideologies, democracy and authoritarianism are not considered in this paper. The reasons for limiting the analysis to the opening sections of the chapters are: 1) the focus of this paper is on how the textbook authors introduce the key concepts of each chapter, and 2) this division limits the amount of material that needs to be examined for this short paper. In addition, several studies (Crookes, 1986; Dudley-Evans & Henderson, 1990;

Holmes, 1997; Peng, 1987) have been conducted on the introduction and discussion sections of research articles, adding validity to this approach.

I will analyze the *Information Structure* of the introductory sections of each textbook chapter to get a sense of the amount of Given and New information provided. From this result, the potential acceptability of these texts for ESL/EFL student readers can be determined.

The psycholinguistic model of reading informs us that individuals have information stored in memory in knowledge structures called schemata. There are schemata of content knowledge as well as of organizational patterns and genre. These schemata are activated through reading and the reader uses them to draw meaning from the text. Reading skills research (Carroll et al., 1988; Resnick, 1984) bears out the common sense assertion that lack of information about a topic can seriously constrain a student's ability to recognize patterns, categorize or "chunk" new information, or generate analogies, related problems and situations.

In Systemic Functional Grammar, information structure separates what is said into units of information and indicates which parts of the information units are most important (Fries, 1998). According to Halliday (1994), Given information "is not news" whereas New information should be attended to because it "is news" (p. 298). Given information is "recoverable" by the listener or reader of a text or message and so is similar to the concepts of background knowledge, knowledge structures and schemata. In contrast, New information is "not recoverable" by the listener or reader and can be considered as "information which is being presented as 'newsworthy'" (Fries, p. 230). In other words, the New information is the message to which the writer or speaker wants the listener or reader to pay attention.

Fries (1998) attempts to clarify the terms Theme and Rheme and Given and New, and while doing so makes a strong argument that "there is a correlation between Thematic position and Given information on the one hand, and Rhematic position and New information on the other hand" (p. 233). He explains further that he believes writers put Given information at the start of clauses "to orient their readers to the message which will come in the rest of the clause" (p. 234) and that New or "newsworthy information" is positioned at the end of the clause. Fries goes on to formally link New information (often associated with the last constituent of a clause) with Rheme through his term N-Rheme which indicates the last constituent of a clause. Information positioned here is being emphasized in order to promote the message of the text, according to Fries.

## **Analysis: Two Textbook Chapter Introductions**

In this section I analyze Chapter 5 of Ranney (1996), "Democracy and Authoritarianism: Principles and Models", together with "Democracy, Totalitarianism, and Authoritarianism", Chapter 4 of Roskin et al. (1997). These two chapter introductions are reproduced in the Appendices. Chapter 4 of Roskin et al. (Appendix A) has an introductory section made up of four paragraphs on pages 61 and 62 and ends just before the heading "Modern Democracy". There are also four paragraphs in the introduction to Chapter 5 of the Ranney textbook (Appendix B). The introductory section of this chapter is on pages 93 and 94 and ends at the heading "Principles for a Working Definition of Democracy".

Chapter 4 of Roskin et al. (1997) begins with references to George Orwell and his book 1984. This is the intended point of departure for the coming message of the first paragraph and it appears to be a good one if we can assume that most readers know something about this book. In sentence 1.3 there are two clauses. They both

provide Given information in the Theme position; first, *The government* and second, *television cameras*. In sentence 1.5, *The media* is Given in the first clause and *the people* is Given in the second. The final two clauses of the paragraph have *Every citizen* and *Citizens* as Given information.

Paragraph two contrasts the historical city-state of Athens with the totalitarian nightmare described in Orwell's book *1984*. Given information remains sparse and appears to consist of: *Here* (2.2) referring to ancient Athens; *The Assembly* (2.4); and, *Decisions of the Assembly* (2.5).

The following paragraph begins with Given information in the Theme position, *George Orwell's picture of totalitarianism and the Athenian ideal of democracy*. Sentence 3.3 has two clauses and each clause contains Given information in the Theme position. First is *The table*, which refers to Table 4.1 that was introduced just prior, and second is *the democratic nations*.

In paragraph four, the Theme position of the first clause has the Given information *As with all attempts at generalization*. Then, in 4.3, *Athens's democracy* is Given information located in the Theme position. The next clause in 4.4 has the Given information, *The various characteristics listed for each government system*. The paragraph closes out with this Given information: *the Soviet Union* (4.5), *Soviet voters* (4.6), and *the democracies* (4.7).

Ranney's Chapter 5 is preceded by four quotations. The chapter begins, *The foregoing statements*, and this reference to these quotations is the first bit of Given information. The remainder of the paragraph has Given information that was presented in Chapter 4 of the book and noted in the quotes at the top of Chapter 5: *Fascists*, *Communists*, *Conservatives* and *Liberals* all believe in democracy. This is contrasted in the final clause of the paragraph with *Only a handful of old-fashioned absolute monarchs*.

Paragraph two has as Given information: *those statements, democracy* and *Many* (referring to people). In the following paragraph *Some political observers* is the Given information opening and is referred to again in the next clause as *they*.

Given in the Theme position to start the final paragraph of the chapter introduction is, *Most political scientists*. In 4.3, *In this book the term* (meaning democracy) is Given information that is found in the Theme position. The final clause of the chapter introduction starts with an invitation into the next part of the chapter that is not very newsworthy, *We begin*.

## Discipline Textbooks and ESL Students: Information Structure, Background Knowledge and Schema Theory

As was stated earlier, in order to comprehend a text a reader needs schema about rhetorical organization (e.g., expository texts) as well as schema about the content area. Alderson and Urquhart (1988) point out: "If readers bring their background knowledge to the comprehension process, and this knowledge is bound to vary from reader to reader, then there can be no single text-bound comprehension, but rather a host of interpretations" (pp. 168-69). That is, the interaction between text processing and schemata is a complex and personal one. There is more than one way to understand a text. Texts are open to interpretation and interpretation is dependent upon the type of background knowledge possessed by the reader. In addition, it is important to acknowledge that "if the schemata do not exist for the reader they cannot be used" (Carroll, 1988). Carroll goes on to stress also that the appropriate schemata need to be activated for comprehension to occur.

When studying expository texts such as those examined in this paper, “students will find it difficult to deal with vocabulary, sentence structure, and ideational relationships with paragraphs” (Singer & Donlan, 1989, p. 427). When an author writes in straightforward language, and provides Given information that is appropriate for the audience along with clear examples of New information, a reader should have few problems comprehending the text. Of course, discipline specialists in the universities presume that students entering their courses know how to read expository texts. However, more and more non-native speakers are entering universities in English-speaking countries and this fact calls the traditional assumptions, methods and materials into question. Although content-area teachers intent on covering a large amount of material in their courses might see instruction in how to read and write paragraphs as a waste of time (Benesch, 1999), this type of instruction could be of great value to many of their students.

What are the particular difficulties that international students might experience with the two sample texts appended to this paper? The analysis conducted in this paper confirms that Given information, which is assumed by a writer as familiar or background information accessible by readers, is usually presented in the Theme position of a clause and that New information follows it in Rheme position. This is consistently true, with very few exceptions, throughout these sample texts. One difficulty for non-native English speakers from non-European cultural backgrounds could be the sparseness of Given information. As we might expect from textbooks, the ratio of New to Given information is very high. A related concern is that these texts were likely not written with an international student audience in mind. This fact could result in a type of text bias that can be problematic for international students.

The chapter from the Ranney (1996) text has culturally specific information that is mainly Euro-centric with a Judeo-Christian bias. For example, Chapter 5 (Appendix B) contains a quote on democracy that calls it “a kind of conceptual Gladstone bag”. How many undergraduate students would be able to understand this reference? But this chapter does not appear to have been written in such a culturally bound way as others in the book.

Chapter 4 of the Roskin textbook (Appendix A) begins with a discussion of George Orwell’s book *1984*. Next, this totalitarian vision is contrasted with the city-state of Athens in the fifth century B.C. The strong Western bias of the text is again revealed in the statement in paragraph three that, *The table follows the custom in countries adhering to the Western political tradition.*

Another way to examine the information structure of texts is provided by Halliday. He classifies human language use into three metafunctions: the ideational function; the interpersonal function; and, the textual function. Examining the two textbook chapters through the ideational metafunction, could provide more information on the difficulty of the texts for ESL/EFL learners.

Bloor and Bloor (1995) inform us that the ideational function has two subfunctions; the experiential function that relates to content and ideas and the logical function that concerns the relationship between ideas. The introductory sections of the two textbook chapters all aim to inform readers about the world of politics and, thus, use language to convey these ideas and express the ideational function. These chapter introductions are concerned with ideas such as ideology, democracy, and authoritarianism. These abstract concepts will be difficult for many first-year university students to understand.

Table 1 below analyzes the rhetorical structure of the four-paragraph introductions to the two chapters. This comparison illustrates the logical function of

language used in these textbooks. The ideational relationship between paragraphs in these two chapter introductions seems to be quite logical. However, when we think of non-native speakers reading these textbooks, the content could well prove to be problematic. For students from Africa and Asia, for example, the gap between their background knowledge and the presumed Given information of the texts could seriously challenge their ability to comprehend these textbooks. Carrell and Eisterhold (1988) have found that particular content schema often fail to exist for a reader since the schema is culture-specific. Furthermore, Carrell (1988) cites a number of studies that "have all shown that implicit cultural background knowledge of content interact to make texts whose content is based on one's own culture easier to read and understand than syntactically and rhetorically equivalent texts based on a less familiar, distant culture" (p. 104).

**Table 1: Rhetorical Structure of Introductions to Two Textbook Chapters**

Ranney Chapter 5: Democracy and Authoritarianism: Principles and Models	Roskin et al. Chapter 4: Democracy, Totalitarianism, and Authoritarianism
P1: The author states that nearly everyone "believes in" democracy and provides examples of the few political leaders who do not.	P1: The authors describe the totalitarian vision of Orwell's book <i>1984</i> .
P2: The author claims that the word democracy arouses strong positive emotions in most people and, therefore, is used by political leaders, whether democratic or not, to achieve their goals.	P2: The authors contrast the totalitarian vision described in <i>1984</i> with life in Athens during the fifth century B.C.
P3: The author shows that the popularity of democracy is not appreciated by some political observers.	P3: The authors describe a table (Table 4.1) that shows the spectrum of government power from Perfect Democracy to Perfect Totalitarianism.
P4: The author concludes that most Political Scientists believe that the word democracy will continue to play a large role in politics and provides a brief overview of the rest of the chapter.	P4: The authors point out limitations of the analysis in Table 4.1.



## Conclusion

As an EFL instructor involved in team teaching with university professors in the disciplines, I have a responsibility to review the appropriateness of texts for my students. If I were presented with these two text choices for a course and asked my opinion, I would recommend the Ranney (1996) selection. First, the textual function is clearer with the use of headings and subheadings. Also, the author makes more of an effort to build on information presented in previous chapters. Finally, this text is not quite as biased toward American readers as the other. Although not so starkly apparent from Appendix A, a broader analysis has revealed that the interpersonal function in the Roskin et al. book clearly has American authors addressing American students. Analyzing the Information structure of these textbook samples made the information load on readers of textbooks very clear to me. These results only hint at the challenges faced by non-native English speakers when reading college-level texts.

It is impossible to write a textbook for all international students. Texts of every kind must contain some culture-specific information and perspective. Given this fact, professors should be sensitive to the backgrounds of their learners and make attempts to bridge anticipated gaps between schema and text information with appropriately tailored supplementary exercises in class. The number of international students attending universities in English-speaking countries today is growing rapidly. The particular needs of these students should be recognized by professors in the disciplines. The materials used in classes they attend should be selected with some consideration for these students. The "business as usual" attitude of simply assigning readings without any instruction on *how* to read or *what* to look for in a text does not seem good enough for university classrooms today.

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**Appendix A**  
**Reproduction of Introduction to Chapter 4 of Roskin,**  
**Cord, Medeiros, and Jones (1997), pp. 61-62**

Paragraph/ Sentence #	Text
Title	Democracy, Totalitarianism, and Authoritarianism
1.1	In 1949, after many years of reflection on totalitarianism, George Orwell startled the public with his publication of <i>1984</i> , a thinly disguised portrayal of life in the Soviet Union in particular and in totalitarian societies in general.
1.2	In this nightmare, individuals have no rights, only obligations.
1.3	The government may spy on them, arrest them, and interrogate them at will; television cameras monitor the streets, scan public places, and peer into homes.
1.4	The purpose of this unrelenting surveillance is to make sure that everyone is under the state's control – even in private thoughts.
1.5	The media are controlled carefully, and the people are told only what the government wants them to know.
1.6	Every citizen needs the state's permission to marry, to bear children, and to change jobs or places of residence.
1.7	Citizens are creatures of the state.
2.1	Perhaps the most extreme opposite we can find in the annals of history is the traditional image of life in Athens during the fifth century B.C.
2.2	Here, all adult male citizens had the right to attend the General Assembly, which met ten times a year.
2.3	Regardless of his wealth or social standing, each man's vote carried the same weight.
2.4	The Assembly enacted all laws, elected the state's officers, and could compel the state's leaders to appear before it to justify their actions.
2.5	Decisions of the Assembly were reached by a simple majority vote.
2.6	In general, the individual had a role in the decision-making processes of state and was thereby accorded an important, if intangible, sense of dignity and human worth.
3.1	George Orwell's picture of totalitarianism and the Athenian ideal of democracy are at opposite ends of the spectrum of government power, and in between are many variations.

- 3.2 Table 4.1 shows the principal gradations from perfect democracy to perfect totalitarianism and lists some characteristics typical of each of the systems.
- 3.3 The table follows the custom in countries adhering to the Western political tradition (such as the United States) of classifying nations generally as either "democratic" or "nondemocratic" - the democratic nations having governments with limited powers, and the nondemocratic ones having governments with more or less unlimited power over citizens.
- 4.1 As with all attempts at generalization, the effort to list general characteristics for government systems in Table 4.1 cannot be wholly successful.
- 4.2 There is no "average" democratic state or "average" nondemocratic state.
- 4.3 Even Athens's democracy fell far short of being a perfect democracy, for most of the population - women, resident aliens, and slaves - were excluded from participation in the political process, and effective control actually belonged to an elite.
- 4.4 The various characteristics listed for each government system may vary in different nations.
- 4.5 For example, the Soviet Union claimed to offer a broad voting franchise to its adult citizens and reported that 99 percent of eligible voters turned out for elections.
- 4.6 However, Soviet voters had little choice on the ballot, and therefore the franchise has limited value.
- 4.7 Similarly, whereas the democracies claim to protect civil liberties carefully, some persons would argue that these liberties are accorded unevenly - in high degree to middle-class whites and grudgingly or not at all to impoverished nonwhites.

**Appendix B**  
**Reproduction of Introduction to Chapter 5**  
**of Ranney (1996), pp. 93-94**

Paragraph/ Sentence #	Text
Quotes	<p>For the first time in the history of the world, no doctrines are advanced as antidemocratic. The accusation of antidemocratic action or attitude is frequently directed against others, but practical politicians and political theorists agree in stressing the democratic element in the institutions they defend and the theorists they advocate. This acceptance of democracy as the highest form of political or social organization is the sign of a basic agreement in the ultimate aims of modern social and political institutions ... ~ <i>Richard McKeon</i></p> <p>Italian Fascism is the realization of true democracy. ~ <i>Benito Mussolini</i></p> <p><i>Germany under National Socialism is the most ennobled form of a modern democratic state.</i> ~ Joseph Goebbels</p> <p>People's democracies are new, higher forms of democracy as compared to the old, bourgeois-parliamentarian democracy. ~ <i>Soviet Journal</i></p>
Title	Democracy and Authoritarianism: Principles and Models
1.1	The foregoing statements suggest that just about everyone in the world "believes in" democracy.
1.2	Fascists believe in it.
1.3	Communists believe in it.
1.4	Conservatives believe in it.
1.5	Liberals believe in it.
1.6	Only a handful of old-fashioned absolute monarchs like King Fahd of Saudi Arabia and the sultan of Oman scorn to call their regimes democratic.
2.1	But what do those statements mean?
2.2	Nothing more, really, than the fact that the <i>word</i> "democracy" arouses strongly positive emotions in most people, who apparently find it psychologically necessary to claim the label for whatever set of political institutions they prefer.
2.3	Many, indeed, insist that <i>only</i> the particular set of institutions they favor are truly "democratic."
3.1	Some political observers are not impressed by the near-universal popularity of "democracy."

- 3.2 Instead, they are appalled by the fact that democracy seems to be “a kind of conceptual Gladstone bag, which, with a little manipulation, can be made to accommodate almost any collection of social facts we may wish to carry about in it.”
- 4.1 Most political scientists, however, believe that, whether they like it or not, the word is here to stay and will continue to play an important part in talk about politics.
- 4.2 Accordingly, perhaps the best we can do is to identify its principal meanings and specify which one we are using.
- 4.3 In this book the term will be used in constructing models of democracy and authoritarianism that will help us to compare and contrast actual governments.
- 4.4 We begin by considering some defining principles of democracy.