

TEACHING THEME–RHEME STRUCTURES TO UZBEK LEARNERS OF ENGLISH: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract. this paper investigates the challenges faced by Uzbek learners in acquiring the concept of theme–rheme structure in English and proposes practical pedagogical solutions. Based on systemic functional linguistics and contrastive language analysis, the study identifies cross-linguistic interference and limited instructional materials as key barriers. The article argues for explicit instruction and the incorporation of functional-pragmatic tasks in the Uzbek EFL classroom to develop learners' ability to convey intended information structure accurately and fluently.

Key words: theme–rheme, Uzbek EFL learners, systemic functional grammar, contrastive analysis, sentence focus, language interference, discourse organization

In English, as in many languages, communication is not merely a transfer of words but of meaning that is hierarchically structured through grammar, intonation, and word order. One central element of this communicative structure is the organization of sentences into theme (the given or known information) and rheme (the new or focused information).

The importance of this distinction is widely recognized in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly in the work of M.A.K. Halliday, who emphasized that "the theme is what the speaker chooses as the point of departure of the message". Despite its relevance to coherent communication, theme–rheme structure is largely ignored in Uzbek EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instruction, resulting in unidiomatic expressions and miscommunication.

This article explores the challenges Uzbek learners face in acquiring this concept due to the differences in syntactic flexibility and pragmatic strategies between English

and Uzbek. It also offers methodologically grounded strategies for explicit instruction, rooted in contrastive analysis and discourse-based pedagogy.

Theme and rheme, also known as topic and comment, have been extensively studied by scholars of both the Prague School (Mathesius, Danes) and Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday). In English, theme typically coincides with grammatical subject, while rheme contains the new information.

Example (English):

John bought a new car.

→ Theme: John | Rheme: bought a new car

In Uzbek:

Yangi mashina sotib oldi John.

→ Theme: Yangi mashina (due to fronting) | Rheme: sotib oldi John

This illustrates that Uzbek allows greater word order flexibility, where intonation or topical particles, not syntactic position, mark the informational focus. This functional asymmetry contributes to interference when Uzbek learners write or speak in English.

Cross-linguistic Interference

Uzbek is a relatively free word order language with strong reliance on context and morphology for signaling information structure. Consequently, learners often misplace rheme in English by mimicking Uzbek patterns.

Example:

He a book bought – A direct transfer from Uzbek structure.

Intonation and Stress Misuse

In English, rheme is often marked prosodically — stress and intonation help identify new information. Uzbek learners, however, are less attuned to these cues, especially in oral communication, leading to flat or ambiguous delivery.

Lack of Instruction in Curriculum

Most Uzbek English textbooks do not address information structure explicitly. Grammar-translation and form-focused approaches dominate, with little attention paid to the pragmatic aspect of sentence construction.

Pedagogical Solutions

1 Addressing Cross-Linguistic Interference

To mitigate Uzbek→English transfer effects on information structure, instruction should make the mapping between Uzbek flexibility and English constraints explicit. First, short contrastive mini-lectures should establish that English typically aligns theme with the clausal point of departure (often the subject) and packages new information (rheme) toward the sentence-final span, with nuclear stress falling on the focus of the intonation unit. Uzbek, by contrast, can license a wider range of pre- and post-verbal configurations through morphology and particles without losing intelligibility. The goal is not to suppress L1 strategies, but to re-target them within English discourse norms.

Following awareness-raising, learners should complete controlled transformation drills that keep propositional content constant while rotating the focus using English-appropriate means (canonical SVO + nuclear stress; marked adverbial themes; restrained clefting for emphasis). Each transformation must be accompanied by a one-sentence metalinguistic justification (e.g., “rheme aligned with the sentence-final position; subject retained as default theme”). Next, guided paragraphing tasks require students to sustain a dominant theme over 4–6 sentences and then promote former rhemes to new themes, practicing linear thematic progression rather than ad-hoc reordering. This paragraph-level discipline helps learners reconceptualize focus placement as a discourse choice rather than a mere sentence-by-sentence shuffle.

Finally, repair-and-justify exercises should target typical transfer artifacts (e.g., He a book bought). Students first normalize the string into idiomatic English (He bought a book), then underline the intended rheme and briefly explain how the revision restores English information-structural expectations. Such justification routines cultivate procedural knowledge—the internalized “why” behind the “how.”

2. Building Prosodic Control for Rheme Signaling

Because English frequently cues rheme prosodically through the nuclear stress of the intonation unit, learners need regular, short-cycle practice that connects what is new to how it sounds. Three routines can be integrated into ordinary lessons without curricular overhaul.

(1) Contrastive-stress chains: learners produce the same clause with stress shifted over different constituents (e.g., JOHN bought the car / John BOUGHT the car / John bought the CAR) and paraphrase, in one line, the changed implicature after each take.

(2) Shadowing with nucleus marking: students shadow 10–12-second clips (news leads, interviews) in three passes—listen, shadow, record—and then mark the nuclear syllable on a transcript before a brief peer check (“Does your main stress match the intended rheme?”).

(3) Syntax-prosody pairing: after learners correctly place nuclear stress in a canonical clause, they produce a clefted or fronted variant and discuss register trade-offs (clefts heighten salience but can sound heavy in academic prose).

Assessment should remain lightweight but continuous: a 0–3 micro-scale for nucleus placement (0 = absent/misplaced; 3 = accurate and consistent) attached to short speaking tasks (30–45 seconds). By coupling auditory targets with discourse intent (what is being highlighted and why), prosody becomes a meaning-bearing resource, not an ornamental afterthought.

3. Embedding Information Structure in the Curriculum

The curricular gap can be closed by weaving a 6–8-week “Theme–Rheme strand” into existing skills courses rather than launching a standalone module. The strand advances four competencies: (i) identify theme/rheme in short texts; (ii) manipulate focus via grammatical and prosodic means; (iii) preserve information structure in EN↔UZ translation; and (iv) sustain thematic progression across a paragraph.

Each weekly cycle should include:

- a 5–7-minute awareness segment (one focused concept with two annotated examples);
- controlled practice (identification and micro-transformations at sentence level);
- a communicative task (mini-presentation highlighting a chosen rheme, or a translation clinic that preserves source focus rather than word order);
- a brief reflection (two sentences explaining why a given theme choice or focus placement served the discourse goal).

Materials ought to be genre-matched (e.g., news leads, academic abstracts, interviews) to avoid register skew and to demonstrate how information load is managed differently across discourse types. Where feasible, simple corpus glimpses (e.g., searching cleft patterns or initial adverbial themes in English) can anchor instruction in usage rather than intuition.

For evaluation, a portfolio provides an authentic picture of growth: one annotated paragraph with theme/rheme markings and a note on progression; one 60–90-second recorded talk with a declared intended rheme; and one short bi-directional translation accompanied by a focus-preservation rationale. These artifacts directly evidence that learners can recognize, produce, and justify information-structural choices.

4. Validating Impact through Classroom Research

To ensure that pedagogical changes are not merely intuitive, instructors can implement a small pre–post design: two parallel classes (treatment vs. comparison) complete the same speaking and writing tasks at Weeks 1 and 7/8. Analytic rubrics target (a) theme selection appropriateness, (b) rheme placement, (c) paragraph progression, and (d) nuclear stress accuracy. Even modest effect sizes will substantiate the claim—widely argued in functional and Prague-school traditions—that explicit control of information structure improves coherence, emphasis, and interpretability in L2 production.

This study has argued that effective instruction in theme–rheme—the backbone of information structure—offers Uzbek EFL learners a high-leverage path to clearer emphasis, stronger coherence, and more accurate communicative intent in English. The analysis identified three interlocking constraints that routinely derail learner output: cross-linguistic interference from Uzbek’s flexible constituent order, under-developed control of English nuclear stress and intonation, and curricular underexposure to discourse-level organization. In response, we proposed a tightly scoped, classroom-ready suite of interventions: explicit contrastive modeling that re-targets L1 strategies within English norms; short, recurring prosody routines that couple “what is new” with “how it sounds”; and a 6–8-week strand embedded in existing skills courses to cultivate theme selection, rheme placement, and sustainable thematic progression. Together, these practices reposition information structure as a meaning-bearing system rather than a stylistic afterthought.

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