

**Attentional properties in language and second language learners' written discourse:
A functional-cognitive study on the perception of thematic clause structure and textual
informational structure**

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This paper presents the results of a study carried out in 2012 that aimed at investigating the degree of perception of the thematic structure of the clause (theme and rheme) and the informational structure of a text (distribution of given and new elements) by Brazilian learners of English, undergraduate language students from a Federal University in Brazil. In a previous study, Tenuta (2001) analyzed some aspects of the interlanguage of Brazilian learners of English and found that these learners had little awareness of the principles that rule the distribution of information in written texts. Almost eleven years later, this study is partially replicated with the intention of offering a broader picture of the written production of Brazilian English learners from a functional-cognitive perspective (Talmy 2000, Halliday 1973; Chafe 1994;). The main theoretical background of the study came from the principles of cognitive linguistics relative to how linguistic aspects realized in the course of a discourse can range along a gradient of access to attention, from ones with interruptive capacity, to ones that usually remain unconscious (Talmy 2000). The corpus of this research consisted of a series of exercises which were administered to undergraduate students in order to check: (a) the perception, by learners, of the necessity of moving some components of the clause in order to meet particular discourse demands; (b) the perception, by learners, of the relationship between the thematic structure and the syntactic structure of the clause, (c) the establishment (or not) of adequate reference and the use of cohesive elements in a text, (d) the presence of appropriate clause structure in terms of SVO order and the presence (or the lack) of a syntactic subject, (e) the awareness of the fact that the same propositional content can be expressed through different nominal and verbal structures, (f) the perception, by learners, of the grammaticality of sentences with subjects performing different thematic roles. The findings of this study can help describe the most relevant features of Brazilian learners' written discourse. It also sheds light to the significance of connecting functional-cognitive approaches to descriptive studies in order to find out more about how a particular level of attention to a linguistic entity is set in terms of foregrounding or backgrounding attentional elements, as well as in terms of how some attentional properties found in language can display commonalities and differences with attentional properties in other cognitive systems.

References

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