

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract

Discourse analysis is a general term for a number of approaches to analyze written, spoken, signed language use or any significant semiotic event. The objects of discourse analysis are writing, talk, conversation, communicative event, etc. To have a primary understanding on the discourse analysis in language teaching and learning, the writer hereby tries to descriptively discuss the significance of discourse analysis in language learning and teaching. Of course, this description cannot be claimed as the complete description of discourse analysis since discourse analysis is an ample topic that is applied in various disciplines. At least, however, this paper hopefully can give a highlight to step further.

Keywords: *significance, discourse analysis, language teaching and learning*

I. Introduction

Discourse analysis is defined as the analysis of language beyond the sentence. It is chiefly concerned with the study of grammar, the study of smaller bits of language, such as sounds (phonetics and phonology), parts of words (morphology), meaning (semantics), as well as the order of words in sentences (syntax). (Tannen:2001).

Discourse analysis or discourse studies, is a general term for a number of approaches to analyze written, spoken, signed language use or any significant semiotic event. The objects of discourse analysis are discourse, writing, talk, conversation, communicative event, etc.—are variously defined in terms of coherent sequences of sentences, propositions, speech acts or turns-at-talk. Contrary to much of traditional linguistics, discourse analysts not only study language use 'beyond the sentence boundary', but also prefer to analyze 'naturally occurring' language use, and not invented examples. This is known as corpus linguistics or text linguistics.

Discourse analysis has been taken up in a variety of social science disciplines, including linguistics, sociology, anthropology, social

work, cognitive psychology, social psychology, international relations, human geography, communication studies and translation studies, each of which is subject to its own assumptions, dimensions of analysis, and methodologies.

To have a primary understanding on the discourse analysis, the writer hereby tries to descriptively discuss some necessary items: its origin and development; the sphere of interests; text & discourse, discourse features & types; the significance of discourse analysis in language learning and teaching; grammatical cohesion & lexical cohesion; and critical discourse analysis. Of course, this description cannot be claimed as the complete description of the development of discourse analysis since discourse analysis is an ample topic that is applied in various disciplines. At least, however, this paper hopefully can give a highlight to step further.

To attain a good command of foreign language learners should either be exposed to it in genuine circumstances and with natural frequency, or painstakingly study lexis and syntax assuming that students have some contact with natural input. Classroom discourse seems to be the best way of systematizing the linguistic code that learners are to acquire. The

greatest opportunity to store, develop and use the knowledge about the target language is arisen by exposure to authentic discourse in the target language provided by the teacher (Dakowska 2001:86).

Language is not only the aim of education as it is in the case of teaching English to Polish students, but also the means of schooling by the use of mother tongue. Having realized that discourse analysts attempted to describe the role and importance of language in both contexts simultaneously paying much attention to possible improvement to be made in these fields. It has also been settled that what is essential to be successful in language learning is interaction, in both written and spoken form. In addition, students' failures in communication which result in negotiation of meaning, requests for explanation or reorganization of message contribute to language acquisition. One of the major concerns of discourse analysts has been the manner in which students ought to be involved in the learning process, how to control turn-taking, provide feedback as well as how to teach different skills most effectively on the grounds of discourse analysis' offerings (Trappes-Lomax 2004:153).

Van Dijk's earlier work in text linguistics and discourse analysis (1977, 1988) already shows the interest he takes in texts and discourse as basic units and social practices. Like other critical linguistic theorists, he traces the origins of linguistic interest in units of language larger than sentences and in text- and context-dependency of meanings. Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) considered the relevance of discourse to the study of language processing. Their development of a cognitive model of discourse understanding in individuals, gradually developed into cognitive models for explaining the construction of meaning on a social level. In the Handbook of Discourse Analysis van Dijk (1985) collected the work of a variety of scholars for whom language and how it functions in discourse is variously the

primary object of research, or a tool in the investigation of other social phenomena.

II. Discussion

2.1 Application of Discourse Analysis to Teaching Grammar

There are a number of questions posed by discourse analysts with reference to grammar and grammar teaching. In particular, they are interested in its significance for different languages, their frequency of occurrence in speech and writing which is to enable teaching more natural usage of the target language, as well as learners' native tongue (McCarthy 1991:47).

While it is possible to use a foreign language being unaware or vaguely aware of its grammatical system, educated speakers cannot allow themselves to make even honest mistakes, and the more sophisticated the linguistic output is to be the more thorough knowledge of grammar gains importance. Moreover, it is essential not only for producing discourse, but also for their perception and comprehension, as many texts take advantage of cohesive devices which contribute to the unity of texts, but might disturb their understanding by a speaker who is not aware of their occurrence.

Anaphoric reference, which is frequent in many oral and written texts, deserves attention due to problems that it may cause to learners at various levels. It is especially important at an early stage of learning a foreign language when learners fail to follow overall meaning turning much attention to decoding information in a given clause or sentence. Discourse analysts have analyzed schematically occurring items of texts and how learners from different backgrounds acquire them and later on produce. Thus, it is said that Japanese students fail to distinguish the difference between *he* and *she*, while Spanish pupils have problems with using *his* and *your*. Teachers, being aware of possible difficulties in teaching some aspects of grammar, should pay particular attention to them during the introduction of the new material

to prevent making mistakes and errors (McCarthy 1991:36).

The most prominent role in producing sophisticated discourse, and therefore one that requires much attention on the part of teachers and learners is that of words and phrases which signal internal relation of sections of discourse, namely conjunctions. McCarthy (1991) claims that there are more than forty conjunctive words and phrases, which might be difficult to teach. Moreover, when it comes to the spoken form of language, where *and*, *but*, *so*, *then* are most frequent, they may take more than one meaning, which is particularly true for *and*. Additionally, they not only contribute to the cohesion of the text, but are also used when a participant of a conversation takes his turn to speak to link his utterance to what has been said before (McCarthy 1991:48).

The foregoing notions that words crucial for proper understanding of discourse, apart from their lexical meaning, are also significant for producing natural discourse in many situations support the belief that they should be pondered on by both teachers and students. Furthermore, it is advisable to provide learners with contexts which would exemplify how native users of language take advantage of anaphoric references, ellipses, articles and other grammar related elements of language which, if not crucial, are at least particularly useful for proficient communication (McCarthy 1991:62).

2.2 Application of Discourse Analysis to Teaching Vocabulary

What is probably most striking to learners of a foreign language is the quantity of vocabulary used daily and the amount of time that they will have to spend memorizing lexical items. Lexis may frequently cause major problems to students, because unlike grammar it is an open-ended system to which new items are continuously added. That is why it requires close attention and, frequently, explanation on the part of the teacher, as well as patience on the part of the student.

Scholars have conducted in-depth research into techniques employed by foreign language learners concerning vocabulary memorization to make it easier for students to improve their management of lexis. The conclusion was drawn that it is most profitable to teach new terminology paying close attention to context and co-text that new vocabulary appears in which is especially helpful in teaching and learning aspects such as formality and register. Discourse analysts describe co-text as the phrases that surround a given word, whereas, context is understood as the place in which the communicative product was formed (McCarthy 1991:64).

From studies conducted by discourse analysts emerged an important idea of lexical chains present in all consistent texts. Such a chain is thought to be a series of related words which, referring to the same thing, contribute to the unity of a communicative product and make its perception relatively easy. Additionally, they provide a semantic context which is useful for understanding, or inferring the meaning of words, notions and sentences. Links of a chain are not usually limited to one sentence, as they may connect pairs of words that are next to one another, as well as stretch to several sentences or a whole text. The relation of words in a given sequence might be that of reiteration or collocation, however, analysts are reluctant to denote collocation as a fully reliable element of lexical cohesion as it refers only to the likelihood of occurrence of some lexical items. Nevertheless, it is undeniably helpful to know collocations as they might assist in understanding of communicative products and producing native-like discourse (McCarthy 1991:65).

Since lexical chains are present in every type of discourse it is advisable to familiarize learners with the way they function in, not merely because they are there, but to improve students' perception and production of expressive discourse. Reiteration is simply a repetition of a word later in the text, or the use

of synonymy, but what might require paying particularly close attention in classroom situation is hyponymy. While synonymy is relatively easy to master simply by learning new vocabulary dividing new words into groups with similar meaning, or using thesauri, hyponymy and superordination are more abstract and it appears that they require tutelage. Hyponym is a particular case of a more general word, in other words a hyponym belongs to a subcategory of a superordinate with narrower meaning, which is best illustrated by an example: *Brazil, with her two-crop economy, was even more severely hit by the Depression than other Latin American states and the country was on the verge of complete collapse* (Salkie 1995:15). In this sentence the word *Brazil* is a hyponym of the word *country* - its superordinate. Thus, it should not be difficult to observe the difference between synonymy and hyponymy: while Poland, Germany and France are all hyponyms of the word *country*, they are not synonymous. Discourse analysts imply that authors of communicative products deliberately vary discursive devices of this type in order to bring the most important ideas to the fore, which in case of English with its wide array of vocabulary is a very frequent phenomenon (McCarthy 1991, Salkie 1995).

One other significant contribution made by discourse analysts for the use of vocabulary is noticing the omnipresence and miscellaneous manners of expressing modality. Contrary to popular belief that it is conveyed mainly by use of modal verbs it has been proved that in natural discourse it is even more frequently communicated by words and phrases which may not be included in the category of modal verbs, yet, carry modal meaning. Lexical items of modality inform the participant of discourse not only about the attitude of the author to the subject matter in question (phrases such as *I believe, think, assume*), but they also give information about commitment, assertion, tentativeness (McCarthy 1991:85).

Discourse analysts maintain that knowledge of vocabulary-connected discourse devices supports language learning in diverse manners. Firstly, it ought to bring students to organize new items of vocabulary into groups with common context of use to make them realize how the meaning of a certain word might change with circumstances of its use or co-text. Moreover, it should also improve learners' abilities to choose the appropriate synonym, collocation or hyponym (McCarthy 1991:71).

2.3 Application of Discourse Analysis to Teaching Text Interpretation

Interpretation of a written text in discourse studies might be defined as the act of grasping the meaning that the communicative product is to convey. It is important to emphasize that clear understanding of writing is reliant on not only what the author put in it, but also on what a reader brings to this process. McCarthy (1991) points out that reading is an exacting action which involves recipient's knowledge of the world, experience, ability to infer possible aims of discourse and evaluate the reception of the text.

Painstaking research into schemata theory made it apparent that mere knowledge of the world is not always sufficient for successful discourse processing. Consequently, scholars dealing with text analysis redefined the concept of schemata dividing it into two: content and formal schemata. Content, as it refers to shared knowledge of the subject matter, and formal, because it denotes the knowledge of the structure and organization of a text. In order to aid students to develop necessary reading and comprehension skills attention has to be paid to aspects concerning the whole system of a text, as well as crucial grammar structures and lexical items. What is more, processing written discourse ought to occur on global and local scale at simultaneously, however, it has been demonstrated that readers employ different

strategies of reading depending on what they focus on (McCarthy 1991:168).

2.3.1 Top-down and bottom-up text processing

Distinguishing noticeably different approaches to text processing led to distinction of manners of attending to written communicative products. Bottom-up processes are those which are involved in assimilating input from the smallest chunks of discourse: sounds in speech and letters in texts, afterwards moving to more and more general features. This technique is frequently

applied by lower-level learners who turn much attention to decoding particular words, thus losing the more general idea, that is the meaning of a given piece of writing. In the same way learning a new language begins: first the alphabet, then words and short phrases, next simple sentences, finally elaborate compound sentences. While it is considered to be a good way of making learners understand the language, a wider perspective is necessary to

2.3.2 Types of text

Obviously, all texts have a certain feature in common, namely they are intended to convey some meaning. This function, however, might be fulfilled in a number of different ways: a road sign 'stop', and a six hundred pages long novel are both texts which might serve that purpose, yet, there are certain characteristics that distinguish them. The above example presents the idea somewhat in the extreme, although, enumerating several other common types of texts might affirm that the notion of text is a very broad one and is not limited to such varieties as those that can be found in language course books (Cook 1990, Crystal 1995).

Differences between texts might be striking, while menu is usually easy to read, legal documents or wills are not. All of them, however, have certain features that others lack, which if explained by a qualified teacher might serve as a signpost to interpretation.

enable students to successfully produce comprehensible discourse (Cook 1990, McCarthy 1991).

Alternatively, top-down processing starts with general features of a text, gradually moving to the narrower. This approach considers all levels of communicative products as a total unit whose elements work collectively, in other words, it is more holistic. Not only does the information in a text enable readers to understand it, but it also has to be confronted with recipient's former knowledge and expectations which facilitate comprehension. It is important to make students aware of these two ways of dealing with written discourse and how they may be exploited depending on the task. When learners are to get acquainted with the main idea of a particular communicative product they should take advantage of top-down approach, while when answering detailed true-false questions they would benefit from bottom-up reading (Cook 1990, McCarthy 1991).

Additionally, the kind of a given text might also provide information about its author, as for example in the case of recipes, warrants or manuals, and indirectly about possible vocabulary items and grammar structures that can appear in it, which should facilitate perception of the text. Having realized what kind of passage learners are to read, on the basis of its title they should be able to predict the text's content, or even make a list of vocabulary that might appear in the communicative product. With teacher's tutelage such abilities are quickly acquired which improves learners' skills of interpretation and test results (Cook 1990, McCarthy 1991, Crystal 1995)

2.3.3 Patterns in text

Having accounted for various kinds of associations between words, as well as clauses and sentences in discourse, the time has come to examine patterns that are visible throughout written communicative products. Patterning in

texts contributes to their coherence, as it is thanks to patterns that writing is structured in a way that enables readers to easily confront the received message with prior knowledge. Salkie (1995) indicates that the majority of readers unconsciously makes use of tendencies of arranging texts to approach information.

Among most frequently occurring patterns in written discourses there are inter alia claim-counterclaim, problem-solution, question-answer or general-specific statement arrangements. Detailed examination of such patterning revealed that problem-solution sequence is frequently accompanied by two additional parts, namely background (in other words introduction) and evaluation (conclusion). While in some elaborate texts the background and the problem might be presented in the same sentence, in other instances - when reader is expected to be familiar with the background, it might not be stated in the text itself. Although both cohesive devices and problem-solution patterns often occur in written communicative products only the former are designated as linguistic means, since patterning, when encountered, has to be faced with assumptions, knowledge and opinion of the reader (McCarthy 1991, Salkie 1995).

One other frequently occurring arrangement of texts is based on general-specific pattern which is thought to have two variations. In the first one a general statement is followed by a series of more specific sentences referring to the same broad idea, ultimately summarized by one more general remark. Alternatively, a general statement at the beginning of a paragraph might be followed by a specific statement after which several more sentences ensue, each of which is more precise than its predecessor, finally going back to the general idea (McCarthy 1991:158).

As McCarthy (1991: 161) points out, the structure of patterns is fixed, yet the number of sentences or paragraphs in a particular part of a given arrangement might vary. Furthermore, one

written text might contain several commonplace patterns occurring consecutively, or one included in another. Therefore, problem-solution pattern present in a text might be filled with general-specific model within one paragraph and claim-counterclaim in another. As discourse analysts suggest making readers aware of patterning might sanitize them to clues which enable proper understanding of written communicative products.

III. Conclusion

The significance of discourse analysis in language teaching and learning could be seen in the previous discussions on the application of discourse analysis to teaching grammar, teaching vocabulary and teaching text interpretation. In teaching grammar teachers being aware of possible difficulties in teaching some aspects of grammar, should pay particular attention to them during the introduction of the new material to prevent making mistakes and errors. In teaching vocabulary, bringing students to organize new items of vocabulary into groups with common context of use to make them realize how the meaning of a certain word might change with circumstances of its use or co-text. Moreover, it should also improve learners' abilities to choose the appropriate synonym, collocation or hyponym. In teaching text interpretation the emphasizing that clear understanding of writing is reliant on not only what the author put in it, but also on what a reader brings to this process.

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