Discourse Analysis in the ESL Classroom

Amir Reza Nemat Tabrizi

Department of English Language, Payame Noor University, I. R. of Iran

amemati@pnu.ac.ir

Deepti Gupta

Professor, Department of English, Panjab University, Chandigarh

deepti.elt@gmail.com

Mohita Saxena

Research Scholar, Dept. of English, Panjab University, Chandigarh

mohita.saxena@gmail.com

Abstract

This article attempts a user-friendly definition of discourse analysis. By defining it in this manner, the authors hope to encourage teachers to use it in their ESL classrooms. To this end, they suggest certain concrete measures that bring discourse analysis into the ESL classroom.

Keywords: discourse, discourse analysis, ELT, communicative approach, second

language learning, ESL

Introduction

At some time or the other, every teacher trainer faces the 'This is not feasible' response on introducing new methodology. By and large, practising teachers remain wary of using what they label as 'ELT procedures' in the classroom. This article will try to demystify discourse analysis for teachers and hence will try to make a small dent in the resistance to trying novel approaches in the classroom by suggesting 'teacher-friendly' ways of using discourse analysis in the ESL classroom.

Defining Discourse Analysis

One possible definition of Discourse Analysis (henceforth D.A.) is 'the study of how sentences in spoken and written language form larger meaningful units such as paragraphs, conversations, interviews, etc". (Richards, Platt and Weber 84). So, D.A., then, is concerned with linguistic analysis beyond the sentence.

Another definition describes it as the discipline that studies the relationship between form and function in verbal communication (Rekema 13). Thus, it does not attempt to describe solely the surface of the linguistic phenomena, but also the intentions and purposes that underlie them, sometimes from a critical perspective.

A third definition portrays it as "the study of the relationship between language and the contexts in which it is used" (McCarthy 5). Therefore, it also aims at setting the linguistic event in a communicative context with the intention of explaining and understanding the production and reception of texts.

D.A. appeared in the 1960s as a meeting point between at least four branches of the humanistic sciences: linguistics, psychology, anthropology and sociology. The origin of D.A., then, is also revealing in the sense that it indicates one of the key questions D.A. tries to answer:

What is the relationship between the addresser's and the addressee's use of the language and the social context in which communication takes place?

D.A. is concerned both with spoken and written texts. In both cases, D.A. attempts to explain how linguistic form relates to functions, a relationship that is not univocal, as one given linguistic form does not lead necessarily to only one function. And, spoken and written discourse has different social uses and communicative functions, which makes the form of spoken and written texts completely different.

D.A. also has a descriptive objective. It tries to describe large pieces of text, structuring them into patterns. For example, Sinclair and Coulthard described the structure of discourse in school classrooms[1], and they discovered a very frequent 'exchange' that consists of three 'moves', the opening move (or initiation), the answering move (or response) and the follow-up move. Or, concerning normally written texts, studies of cohesion, or the links between the different parts of the text, and coherence, or the links between the different 'ideas' of the text, have also helped to define what a good text is for classroom use.

Discourse

To discourse analysts, 'discourse' usually means actual instances of communication in the medium of language. 'Discourse' in this sense is usually a mass noun. Discourse analysts typically speak of discourse rather than discourses, the way one would talk about, for instance, music ('some music' or 'three pieces of music' rather than 'three musics') or information ('the flow of information', 'a great deal of information' rather than 'thousands of informations'). Communication can of course involve other media besides language. Media such as photography, clothing, gesture, architecture and dance are meaningful, too and discourse analysts often need to think about the connections between language and other such semiotic systems.

The label could have been 'language analysis' but choosing 'discourse analysis' underscores the fact that the focus is not language as an abstract system; the focus is on 'language in use'. Rather, the focus is on what happens when people draw on the knowledge they have about language, based on their memories of things they have said, heard, seen or written before, to do things in the world: exchange information, express feelings, make things happen, create beauty, entertain themselves and others and so on. This knowledge - a set of generalizations, which can sometimes be stated as rules, about what words generally mean, about what goes where in a sentence and so on - is what is often referred to as 'language'; when language is thought of as an abstract system of rules or structural relationships. Discourse is both the source of this knowledge (people's generalizations about language are made on the basis of the discourse they participate in) and the result of it (people apply what they already know in creating and interpreting new discourse).

Scholars influenced by Foucault[2] sometimes use 'discourse' in a related but somewhat different sense, as a countable noun. 'Discourses' in this sense can be enumerated and referred to

in the plural. They are conventional ways of talking that both create and are created by conventional ways of thinking. These linked ways of talking and thinking constitute ideologies (sets of interrelated ideas) and serve to circulate power in society. In other words, discourses in this sense involve patterns of belief and habitual action as well as patterns of language. Discourses are ideas as well as ways of talking that influence and are influenced by the ideas. Discourses, in their linguistic aspect, are conventionalised sets of choices for discourse, or talk.

Analysis

The word 'analysis' demonstrates that discourse analysis typically focuses on the analytical process in a relatively explicit way. It is useful to think of D.A. as analogous to chemical analysis. Like chemical analysis, it is a methodology that can be used in answering many kinds of questions. Discourse analysts start out with a variety of research questions and these research questions are often not questions that only discourse analysts ask. Instead, they are often questions that discourse analysts share with other people, both in linguistics and in other fields. Some discourse analysts ask questions that are traditionally asked in linguistics: questions about linguistic structure, about language change, about meaning, about language acquisition. Other discourse analysts ask questions that are more interdisciplinary: questions about such things as social roles and relations, communication and identity. What distinguishes discourse analysis from other sorts of studies that bear on human language and communication lies not in the questions discourse analysts ask but in the ways they try to answer them: by analysing discourse - that is, by examining aspects of the structure and function of language in use.

Linguistic analysis is sometimes a process of taking apart. Discourse analysts often find it useful to divide longer stretches of discourse into parts according to various criteria and then look at the particular characteristics of each part. Divisions can be made according to who is

talking, for example, where the paragraph boundaries are, when a new topic arises, or where the subject ends and the predicate begins. Are grammatical patterns different when social superiors are talking than when their subordinates are? Does new information tend to come in the first sentence of a paragraph? Do special markers signal topic change? Do sentence subjects tend to be slots in which events or actions or feelings can be presented as objects? Discourse can be taken apart into individual words and phrases and concordances of these; sets of statistics about where a particular word is likely to occur, how frequent it is, what words tend to be close to it, can be used to support claims about how grammar works or what words are used to mean.

But analysis can also involve taking apart less literally. One way of analysing something is by looking at it in a variety of ways. An analysis in this sense might involve systematically asking a number of questions, systematically taking several theoretical perspectives or systematically performing a variety of tests. Such an analysis could include a breaking-down into parts. It could also include a breaking-down into functions, i.e., what is persuasive discourse like? What is narrative like? According to participants it could include questions like 'How do men talk in all-male groups? How do psychotherapists talk? What is newspaper writing like?' It could refer to settings, i.e., what goes on in classrooms or in workplaces? It could focus on processes, for example, how do children learn to get the conversational floor? How do people create social categories like 'girl' or 'foreigner' or 'old person' as they talk to, about, among each other?

How discourse analysis is useful

Linguists have long been interested in the structure of words (morphology) and sentences (syntax). D.A. has moved the description of structure up a level, looking at actual stretches of connected text or transcript and providing descriptions of the structure of paragraphs, stories and

conversations. It has shed light on how meaning can be signalled via the arrangement of chunks of information across a series of sentences or via the details of how a conversationalist takes up and responds to what has just been said. It reveals how speakers indicate their semantic intentions and how hearers interpret what they hear and on the cognitive abilities that underlie human symbol use. In the field of pragmatics, discourse analysts looking at corpora of actual talk have helped to describe the basic interpretive principles on which understanding is based and how people use utterances to perform actions. Work on cohesion and coherence examines the meaning of utterances in their linguistic context.

Discourse analysts have also contributed to the study of variation and change in language. Looking at records of discourse over time, they have described mechanisms of change that are internal to talk, such as grammaticalisation. Forms that regularly serve useful functions in showing how speakers intend their words to be taken at a particular moment tend to change over time into required elements of a language's grammar. Discourse analysts have also described social influences connected with historical changes in patterns of language use, such as individual and group identity and they have studied patterns of variation in how people do things with talk such as making lists, constructing arguments and telling stories.

ELT and discourse analysis

Despite the introduction and widespread usage of a plethora of communicative approaches to language learning, the acquisition levels continue to remain dismal in ESL classrooms across the globe, irrespective of the places and the people. A few significant reasons behind this include the limited hours of actual language use, dearth of opportunities to practice English beyond the classrooms and lack of interaction with the various types of functions, speech events and discourse types that one finds beyond a language classroom. It is an open secret that

in the constantly evolving language classroom, the actual time available for the students to practice and interact with the target language, English in the case, is quite insufficient and insignificant. There, therefore, lies a great need for the language instructors all over the world, to introspect, innovate and increase language learning opportunities for their students within the classroom environs in order to stimulate student participation and language retention, in the long run.

The Communicative approaches support the use of D.A. techniques in the classroom. Among other goals, the Communicative approaches suggest one, giving more responsibility to the learner through reduced reliance on teacher-dominant approaches and two, the use of 'authentic' language materials and activities. D.A. in the class can address both these requirements.

Classroom action research is one way for teachers to monitor both the quantity and quality of students' output. By following a four-part process of Record-View-Transcribe-Analyse (Demo, Douglas A.) second language teachers can use discourse analytic techniques to investigate the interaction patterns in their classrooms and see how these patterns promote or hinder opportunities for learners to practice the target language. This process allows language teachers to study their own teaching behaviour, especially the frequency, distribution and types of questions they use and their effect on students' responses.

Step One: **Recording or videotaping a lesson, from start to finish.**

Recording a lesson facilitates a valuable documentation of the ongoing classroom activities on a macro as well as micro scale. Capturing the teacher's lessons and questions (aimed at providing ample target language usage opportunities to the students) alongside students' responses certainly goes a long way in understanding the classroom dynamics. In the absence of

a suitable video-recorder, an effective audio-recorder may be employed in order to capture the live classroom interactions, to be worked upon in the due course of time.

Furthermore, in the absence of any digital assistance, one may even request a teacher colleague to come and observe the classroom dynamics and transcribe the ongoing interactions into a well-labelled script. After all, it is the end result that matters, whatever may be the source.

Step Two: Watching the videotapes /listening to the audiotapes/reading the script.

A review of the collected speech samples whether audio/video/print, certainly lends far more deep and impressionistic insights into the comprehension levels of the ESL learners. Taking a quick recap of the kinds of questions asked and the respective responses generated helps an ESL instructor in revamping his/her lesson plans and interaction patterns for more sustained classroom interactions. A closer look at the recurring patterns in one's questioning style and the impact it has on the students' responses further helps a teacher in furthering the motivation levels and interests of the language learners in the speech acts.

Step Three: Transcribing the lesson at hand:

Irrespective of the presence or otherwise of the latest digital assistants, it would be a great idea to transcribe the speech acts being exchanged in the classroom among the students and teachers. A transcribed lesson or *script* as it is more aptly called, will certainly serve a long way in helping an ELS instructor in identifying the various types of questions emerging out of the present data and thereafter, focusing on the more relevant and specific questions along with appropriate student responses.

Step Four: Analysing the videotapes/audiotapes and transcripts.

Analysing the collected speech samples along with their respective transcripts empowers an ESL instructor in breaking through most of the challenges that emerge while trying to

comprehend the classroom interaction patterns in a struggling ESL classroom. Some of the likely questions that are bound to emerge in your head as you analyse your transcripts include:

- Your intention behind framing specific questions?

- Identifying the most frequently asked type of questions? Open or closed?

- What were the students' responses to different types of questions?

- Which questions elicited maximum language exposure and usage from the students?

- Were the questions in sync with your goals for teaching and learning?

- Did the students ask any questions?

- Did your questions have a likely effect in facilitating the students' with ample opportunities to practice the target language?

- Were you satisfied with their responses?

Focusing on such actual classroom interactions, ESL instructors can explore, experience and thereby, focus on the different aspects of their teaching styles that are in consonance with creating sound learning language opportunities for their ESL learners. This would certainly help ESL teachers and learners alike in progressing further on their journey towards target language acquisition using a wide range of suitable discourse types.

Besides, language instructors may also use the Record-View-Transcribe-Analyse scheme to explore suitable cross-communication patterns in various classroom activities, such as student-to-student or small-group cooperative or student-teacher interactions. Communicative activities provide a wide range of interaction patterns to the students in order to facilitate them in overcoming their inhibition to speak and thus, muster up the courage and enthusiasm to engage in uninhibited and free spoken interactions within the classroom. The wide array of speech patterns that the students come up with during such interactions makes the teacher equip with all

the requisite knowledge that he/she may need to process and analyse while working on their SWOT analysis.

For example, a Reading Theatre activity is likely to provide students with an opportunity to modulate their voices and pronunciation patterns in consonance with the text at hand, whereas an individual Speaking as You Think task gives students a chance to process information quickly and present thoughts as they come to their mind.

Since communicative tasks enable a teacher to evaluate learners' proficiency in a much practical way, a better understanding of the influence of specific activities on learner discourse is bound to motivate teachers to infuse a variety of speaking prompts and tasks in their lesson plans in order to gain a more insightful grasp of students' abilities. Therefore, a thorough recording, transcribing and analysing of students' discourse lends teachers a valuable insight into the effect of specific tasks on students' language production and, in due course of time, into their language development as well.

A discourse analysis of classroom interaction also paves way for an observant teacher to identify and work on various cross-cultural linguistic patterns that may be contributing to communication difficulties within the classroom in one way or the other. For example, some speakers may look forward to prompts given by their peers while they speak, they may appreciate such help being sourced out to them while expressing their views. For some linguistic groups, this discourse behaviour can be interpreted as a signal of peer bonding and team spirit. However, there may other linguistic groups who may view it as a breach on someone's attempt to learn at his/her own pace. In order to take a better call on such cross-cultural linguistic patterns, teachers may employ the Record-View-Transcribe-Analyse technique in order to help

themselves and students identify and explore multifarious communication strategies and their potential for miscommunication within the classroom.

Without discounting the fact that not all variables of language learning are within the purview and control of language teachers, it cannot be denied however, that discourse analysis certainly gives a useful benchmark to language users and instructors alike in making informed changes in classroom communication patterns.

Discourse Analysis and Second Language Learning

Language learners all over the globe face the daunting and exhaustive task of acquiring not only new vocabulary, syntactic patterns and phonology, but also discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, and interactional competence. In order to develop a good grasp on such language elements, they ought to be presented with sufficient language usage opportunities and moments in order to inquire and investigate the systematicity of language at all linguistic levels, especially at the highest level. It is in this regard that the discourse analysis holds a pivotal importance. In the absence of suitable knowledge and experience with the discourse and socio-cultural patterns of the target language, language learners are left with no other option but to turn to the strategies acquired as part of their first language development, which as a matter of fact, may be highly inopportune and inappropriate for their second language environment. Such misinformed practices may lead to grave communication difficulties and misunderstandings that may even last an entire lifetime.

A major challenge that is faced by all second language learners is the limited exposure and experience with a just a handful of interactive practices in their target language. This thwarts not only their interest to learn and communicate in the target language but also demotivates and dispels them from using it even within the necessary classroom interactions. Therefore, one of

the primary aims of second language teaching is to present language learners with sufficient and varied discourse patterns in different texts and interactions in order to quench their thirst for getting ample opportunities to learn and relearn target language elements.

As mentioned earlier, the importance of discourse analysis here plays a major role. Giving the students necessary freedom to study and use target language, and thereby encouraging them to become discourse analysts in the process, is an effective practice in this regard. Upon being given appropriate opportunities to practice language use in authentic environments, second language learners gain a much better and insightful understanding of the discourse patterns associated with a given genre or speech event along with the sociolinguistic factors that bring in indelible linguistic variation across settings and contexts. Language instructors may encourage the students to folow the Record-View-Transcribe-Analyse technique in order to engage in meaningful discourse analysis during classroom conversations. Given below are a series of practices that may help the language instructors and teachers alike in this regard:

Step One: Audio-tape or video-tape a pair of proficient language users engaged in healthy and meaningful conversation, over coffee or a casual walk.

Step Two: Play the recording for students. Ask them to identify relevant patterns in the recorded linguistic behaviour and note down significant deviations or any new development.

Step Three: Transcribe the conversation so that students can gain a more in-depth view of the language material.

Step Four: Ask students to analyse significant discourse features individually, in pairs or in small groups.

Once the students have been familiarized with the process, they may be asked to take up a similar exercise entirely on their own in future. Upon collection, such authentic language data

may serve as an invaluable data bank for future and subsequent examination for various conversational features, to later taken up in comparison to discourse features identified in other speech events. Such a kind of discourse approach to language learning widens the horizons of language use beyond the mere purview of textbooks and makes it more feasible, and thus, lends students with ample opportunities and strategies to explore language as interaction rather than as grammatical units. It therefore, creates a win-win situation for both, language teachers as well as users by making them more equipped and empowered in a dynamic second language learning classroom.

Conclusion

It is time that language teachers give up on undermining the scope and impact of discourse analysis and give it its due weightage in terms of usage and employability. Language teachers, especially, second language teachers can use it not only as a research method for evaluating their own teaching practices but also as a valuable classroom strategy for studying interaction among language learners. Similarly, they must also encourage their students to reap rich dividends by employing the technique of discourse analysis in exploring and understanding the target language and the multifarious contexts in which it is used. This would definitely go a long way in empowering students' command over the second language and thus steer classroom dynamics in a desired direction. Once D.A. reaches the classroom, the teacher can approach its use in framing tests and can also look towards critical discourse analysis for the teaching of literature. The important first step is the initiation of the classroom in discourse analysis, the rest follows naturally once teacher and taught become partners on the road to proficiency.

Endnotes

The Birmingham model is a relatively simple and powerful approach to analysing discourse. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) found a rigid pattern in the language of traditional native-speaker school classrooms. They found that teachers and students spoke according to very fixed perceptions of their roles and their talk conformed to highly structured sequences. The categories mentioned in the article is just a small set of labels that can be used during the D.A. of the classroom, the actual range is quite vast and a teacher can successfully analyse all aspects of spoken discourse in the classroom in an attempt to evaluate its naturalness and effectiveness.

In literary theory, discourse can be a very loosely used term. Foucault's formulations on discourse add to this plurality. For Foucault, at a given moment in history, there will be a particular discourse of a particular field: a set of rules, conventions, systems of mediation and transposition that will govern the way that field will be talked about - when, where and by whom. These 'discursive formations' (1972) not only embody the beliefs and values of a society, rather they force them on everyone by imposing certain ways of looking upon the world while excluding alternatives.

References

Celce-Murcia, M., & Olshtain, E. (2000). *Discourse and Contect in Language Teaching.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Clancy, P., Thompson, S., Suzuki, R., & Tao, H. (n.d.). The Conversational Use of Reactive Tokens in English, Japanese, and Mandarin. *Journal of Pragmatics*(26), 355-387.

Demo, D. A. (2001). *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers.* Retrieved from ERIC Digest: http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0107demo.html

Celce-Murcia, M,. & Olshtain, E.(2000). *Discourse and Context in Language Teaching.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Clancy, P., Thompson, S., Suzuki, R., & H. Tao, H. (1996) . "The Conversational Use of Reactive Tokens in English, Japanese, and Mandarin." Journal of Pragmatics 26 (1996): 355-387.

Demo, Douglas A. "Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers. ERIC Digest." ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics Washington DC.(2001) 6 September, 2006 <http://www.ericdigests.org/2002-2/discourse.htm. >.

Ferguson, Charles A. "Baby Talk as a Simplified Register." In Catharine E. Snow and Charles A. Ferguson. Eds. Talking to Children. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Foucault, M. The Archaeology of Knowledge. A. M. Sheridan-Smith. Trans. London: Tavistock, 1972.

---. Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77. In C. Gordeon. Ed. Brighton: Harvester, 1980.

Grabe, William. Annual Review of Applied Linguistics. Vol.II,1990. USA: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Hoey, M.P. <u>On the Surface of Discourse</u>. London: Allen and Unwin, 1983.

Johnson, K. <u>Understanding Communication in Second Language Classrooms</u>. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

McCarthy, Michael. <u>Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers</u>. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

McCarthy, M., & R. Carter. <u>Language as Discourse: Perspectives for Language Teachers</u>. New York: Longman, 1994.

Rekema, Jan. <u>Introducción a los estudios sobre el discurso</u>. Barcelona: Gedisa, 1999.

Richards, Jack, John Platt and Heidi Weber. <u>Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics</u>. Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1985.

Riggenbach, H. <u>Discourse Analysis in the Language Classroom: Volume 1. The Spoken Language</u>. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

Sinclair, J. McH., and R.M. Coulthard. <u>Towards an Analysis of Discourse</u>. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Young, R., & A. He. <u>Talking and Testing: Discourse Approaches to the Assessment of Oral Proficiency</u>. Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1998.