

**Higher Education of Social Science**

Vol. 5, No. 2, 2013, pp. 42-45

DOI:10.3968/j.hess.1927024020130502.2767

ISSN 1927-0232 [Print]

ISSN 1927-0240 [Online]

www.cscanada.netwww.cscanada.org

Discourse Strategies in the Teaching of English Writing

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Received 3 May 2013; accepted 23 August 2013

Abstract

This paper explores the text types, text patterns and text topic continuity which may be found in texts which are the objects of interpretation by the reader, and they are often signaled by the grammatical and lexical devices. So they are very useful for the teaching of writing.

Key words: Text types; Patterns; Topic continuity; English writing

CUI Fengshuang (2013). Discourse Strategies in the Teaching of English Writing. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 5(2), 42-45. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/view/j.hess.1927024020130502.2767> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.hess.1927024020130502.2767>

INTRODUCTION

Discourses with different types have not only different linguistic styles, but also different structural patterns. Discourse types determine the formation of formal structures of texts and this determination leads to the formation of discourse pattern. This paper explores the text types, patterns and topic continuity which may be found in texts are the objects of interpretation by the reader, and they are often signaled by the grammatical and lexical devices. So they are very useful for the teaching of writing. As to the methodological principle, the research done in the dissertation follows the integration of induction and deduction. It first postulates the definition of the text types, text patterns and text topic continuity. It studies how the text types, text patterns and text topic continuity contribute to text construction. It is concerned

with the structures of the clause and text. The hypothetical theory is testified by the quantitative and critical writing of advertisement text.

The theoretical framework of this dissertation is Halliday's systemic functional theory, especially functional grammar. This theory pays attention to the functional, social and textual points of language. And at the same time, it takes the structure and formal aspects into consideration. It is an integrated theory and has advantages over other theories.

1. DISCOURSE STRATEGIES

Nothing is more evident than the fact that most human activities 'involve the use of language' (Bakhtin, 1986). It is also taken for granted that speakers have a reasonable idea of how language is to be used by way of performing an activity. Yet it is far from this. In order to achieve this, language-users have to exchange series of meanings. Language is "meaning potential" (Halliday, 1994). During this process of exchange, text—a semantic unit—is always involved and is the focus of study of linguists. A text is created by its context, the semiotic environment of people and their activities that we have construed via the concept of Field, Tenor and Mode. At the same time, it also creates that context (Halliday, 1994). In System-Functional grammar, a text is considered as an instance of contextually relevant and appropriate social behavior realized by the linguistic structures generated by the choices from the linguistic systems. So context counts in the end for the explanation of the nature of human language.

Approaches to context derive from the work of the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1923; 1935) who argues that texts have to be understood in relation to their context of situation and context of culture.

By context of situation, he meant the environment of the text. It referred to everything significant that was going on concurrently with the speech activity. Here

Malinowski took a realist view, “the context of situation was often presented as something that speaking subjects experienced sensuously and directly, the apprehension of which was unmediated by any conceptual constructs” (Hasan, 1995). Today, this point of view is abandoned through the work of Firth, Halliday and Hasan etc. Firth pointed out the abstract nature of context of situation and defined it as Schematic Construct: “Context of situation is best used as a suitable schematic construct to apply to language events; ...it is a group of related categories at a different level from grammatical categories but rather of the same abstract nature” (Firth, 1950/1957, p.182).

As to how language and context of situation cooperate, both Makinowski and Firth are given to episodic remarks. This prevents them from giving a clear and systemic view to context of situation. Halliday achieves it. He defines the three components of the context of situation. So the semantic potentials of text can be expected. A more recent formulation of the context of situation is reproduced here: By context of situation, Malinowski meant the environment of the text. Without it, he argued, it was impossible to understand the message. But he also saw that it was necessary to give more than the immediate environment. He saw that in any adequate description, it was necessary to provide information not only about what was happening at the time, but also the total cultural background, because in any linguistic interaction, in any kind of conversational exchange, there were not only the immediate sights and sounds surrounding the event, but also the whole culture history behind the participants, and behind the kind of practices that they were engaged in, determining their significance for the culture, whether practical or ritual. All these played a part in the interpretation of meaning. So he introduced the notion context of culture concurrently with the context of situation. By context of culture, he meant the institutional and ideological background knowledge shared by participants in speech events.

From a systemic-functional point of view, Halliday pointed out the relationship between context of situation and context of culture. The stratum of context can be conceptualized as a system of systems, the totality of which represents the context of culture, just as the totaling of the lexico-grammatical networks represents the grammar of a language. A context of situation is simply a selection expression from this vast system network; technically, it is an instantiation (Halliday, 1991b). Context of situation is to culture as instance is to its system. We can then say with Halliday that in SF, lexicogrammar orders, forms, articulates semantics, the latter orders, forms, articulates context of situation, which in turn is an instantiation of the context of culture. The context of culture in SF calls for a truly trans-disciplinary approach. (Halliday, 1991a). Nothing will be gained by pretending that, once all the verbal semiotic phenomena

have been described, the residue at this level of analysis is zero; and it is even less justifiable to expect that every important phenomenon of human existence is a linguistic phenomenon per se.

Constructing systems for segments of culture implies that linguists have to look to the relations of language, to the material aspects of human life: the socially positioned and positioning conditions of interaction (Bernstein, 1971) to what Vygotsky calls the development of higher mental functions (Wertsch, 1985a & 1985 b etc.) and not least important, to the nature of the phenomena of Popper’s World I (Popper, 1972)—What physicists, chemists, and biologists, and so on study (Hasan, 1995).

But we have to find a perspective to get a way to context of culture through language. Bernstein (1971) thought what determines the relationship between culture and language is mainly social structure, especially the institutional relationships. The valuation as well as the recognition criteria for possible social relations is in the social positions of the speaking persons within the socioeconomic structure of the society. So in order to get an insight about the context of culture, we can study the social position. How the speaking persons are positioned in the socioeconomic structure of the society can be traced by the social relationship between speakers. Given the language habitually used in and associated with particular places in the social structure will have a distinctive from and organization, the social relationship is refracted by language. In the end, we get to language again. Then we can learn something about the context of culture through the social positions reflected in language.

Language as social action always instructs its users to take on certain positions in particular interactions, and trains us to be certain kinds of subject in certain kinds of text. Discourse strategies refer to the general textual strategies and choices made according to the interactive purposes in the production of discourses. Generally speaking, discourse strategies can be mainly divided into the following three parts: discourse types, discourse patterns and discourse-strategic continuities.

1.1 Discourse Types

Discourse types are identified as “a conceptual framework which enables us to classify texts in terms of communicative intentions serving an overall rhetorical purpose” (Hatim & Mason, 1990, p.140), and they may be defined on the cognitive categories or on the basis of strictly linguistic criteria. The commonly accepted typology is Werlich’s (1976) typology, which includes five types: description, narration, exposition, argumentation, and instruction. The typology is based on the cognitive properties of text types: a. differentiation and interrelation of perception in space (description); b. differentiation and interrelation of perception in time (narration); c. comprehension of general concepts through differentiation by analysis and/or synthesis (exposition);

d. judging, evaluation of relations between and among concepts through the extraction of similarities, contrasts, and transforms (argumentation), and e. planning of future behavior (instruction).

1.2 Discourse Pattern

Discourse pattern is another way to classify discourses with inter-textual standards beginning from the form and content structures of the discourses. Discourses types determine the formation of formal structures of texts and this determination leads to the formation of discourse patterns. Generally speaking, there are five discourse patterns: problem-solution, claim-counterclaim, narrative, question-answer, and general-specific patterns. Problem-solution pattern is a “situation-problem-response-evaluation/result” sequence. Claim-counterclaim pattern is typical of argumentative texts. Signs can be seen in such texts, like say, claim, assert, state, false, in fact, agree, dispute, acknowledge, view, evidence, or in reality. Narrative pattern appears in almost all texts. Stories, anecdotes or jokes all belong to the category. Question-answer pattern usually has a clear question at the beginning of the text, and the text is developed to seek for a satisfactory answer to this question. In McCarthy’s opinion, general-specific pattern typically appears in estate agent’s sales literature in Britain, where a general description of the property for sale is followed by detailed descriptions of individual room features, and then, finally a return to a general statement about the whole property again.

1.3 Text-Strategic Continuity

Text-strategic continuity is the concrete example of the text strategies. Generally speaking, there are five types of continuity. They are continuity of time, place, participants, topics and action. Continuity of time is realized by the time chain located at the beginning of the sentences or paragraphs. The temporal expressions at the beginning of each paragraph form a continuity of time to produce cohesion and coherence of the text, and the shift of time divides the text into different smaller units. Continuity of place is realized by the adverbial chains of places at the beginning of the sentences or paragraphs. Continuity of participants is typically realized by the continuity of grammatical subjects or topics of the text. Continuity of topics refers to the continuity of referents of non-humans and non-animals which are treated as topics. Continuity of action is closely connected with time. First, the sequence of texts usually follows the actual sequence of actions, and this is called temporal sequentially; second, there is usually a short gap between continuous actions, and this is called temporal adjacency.

2. DISCOURSE STRATEGIES IN THE TEACHING OF WRITING

Real texts display features of more than one pattern. As this multi-functionality is the rule rather than the

exception, any successful application of text patterns has to be able to accommodate such diversity. The expressed intent of the author may not be the real intent. In many cases these overlap, one of the aims is dominant and the other is a means. For example, information included in an advertisement is there to further the persuasion, so persuasion is the primary aim, but the aims can be achieved in more than one way: the question-answer pattern, the problem-solution pattern, or the claim-counterclaim pattern. The text continuity can be of time, space or topic.

In the teaching of writing, teachers can inform students of such matters with exercises. What should be emphasized to students is that many texts are combinations of one or more of the above discourse patterns and discourse continuities, but often one type, pattern or strategy playing the dominant role. With the different discourse types in mind, the students can decide what discourse patterns will be used to best serve for the purpose of their writing. In fact, this would help students form a framework of the discourse he is required to make in his minds. With the knowledge of discourse continuity strategies, their purposes of communication and textual functions, students can make their own actual texture of the discourse. In practical teaching, teachers can first give students titles of the discourse to be written. Students can be made to write the outlines of the discourse or they can be questioned on the macro-structure strategies of the discourse. With different conditions of the students, teachers can give them different suggestions to help build textual structures.

In the actual creation of texts, certain sequences of choices should be followed. First the choice of text type, then the choice of text patterns and then the text strategic continuity.

Advanced English learners can realize the relationship between text purposes and text types, thus they know the fact that more than one text type can serve for the same writing purpose. In order to achieve certain specific purposes, some special text types can be used to achieve special stylistic results. This practice can be combined with other linguistic theories, such as theories of informativity and theory of context. But this practice should be carried out step by step. First, teachers can inform students of different text types and their application. Then they can be given such exercises. Teachers can give detailed analysis of their choices, and students will make their choices more reasonable and they will have more knowledge as to how to choose the appropriate text type for their writing purposes with more practice.

After the choice of text types is made, another important procedure in writing is to choose the right text pattern. For example, you are asked to write an exposition, what text types would you use? The question-answer

pattern, the problem-solution pattern, or the general-specific pattern? If the problem-solution pattern is chosen, how to arrange these elements in this pattern? So it is necessary to grasp the general structures of these patterns as well. Teachers can tell students the elements and the sequence elements in the patterns. Students can first learn to construct texts with clear structures to achieve proper communicative purposes. Then they can be trained to write texts with combinations of different text patterns, and they should be notified the right use of signaling words of such patterns to orient their readers.

When the text types and text patterns are determined, what we should deal with next is the choice of text strategic continuity, as it determines in what form the sentences enter into the texture of the writing. In the teaching of writing, teachers can explain the different text strategic continuity in detail, and tell them to what text types they can be applied. With some exercises of this type, students can make proper choices of what strategic continuities for their writing purposes.

The following example well illustrates this process of writing. The requirement is to write an advertisement of nuclear energy. The text type here is argumentative or expository. The text type may be the question-answer pattern or the claim-counterclaim pattern. As the purpose of an advertisement is to persuade, the text type may be expository, so the question-answer pattern might be used. After the text type and text pattern are determined, the strategic continuity should be chosen. As what is to be talked about—the topic, is nuclear energy, the continuity of topic may be chosen. With all these choices, an advertisement of nuclear energy would be created:

Wind power; wave power; solar power; tide power.

Whilst their use will increase they are unlikely to be able to provide large amount of economic electricity. Generally, the cost of harnessing their power is huge.

However, there is more practical, reliable and economical way of ensuring electricity for the future.

And that is through nuclear energy.

It's not a new idea, of course. We've been using nuclear electricity for the last 30 years.

What's more, world supplies of uranium are estimated to last for hundreds of years, which will give us more than enough time to develop alternatives if we need to.

So, while some people might not care about children's future.

We do (Advertisement for British Nuclear Forum from the Guardian, 1988, p.17).

CONCLUSION

In traditional teaching of English writing, focus is often put on grammar, writing techniques or word choices. Teachers would correct students' grammar errors, but paid little attention to the cohesion and coherence of the texts, or the organization of the structure. With the discourse

analysis theories, teachers would be able to judge students' writing from a functional view, and students can make their texts more textual.

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