Discourse Analysis and English Language Teaching

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Abstract

In the past, English language teaching (ELT) put more emphasis on the teaching of structure of the language. Meaning and contexts seemed to be neglected. However, over the past few years, the trend has changed. Grammar and structure (language forms) are not the single element of language learned in English language learning. Context should be taken into account when teaching and learning a language. In this paper, I shall discuss the relationship between contexts and language teaching, particularly English language teaching. In other words, this paper discussess discourse analysis in regard to ELT.

Keywords: *discourse analysis, English language teaching*

1. Introduction

Traditionally, the teaching of English Language was structural-based which means language was taught as an isolated unit without taking contexts into account. Since the emergence of discourse analysis in 1970s, English language teaching (ELT) has changed. This paper discusses the definitions of discourse analysis, and its impacts on the teaching of English grammar, vocabulary, phonology, spoken, and written language.

2. Literature Review

Discourse analysis is defined as the relationship between language and its context. It is a combination of different disciplines, such as linguistics, semiotics, psychology, anthropology, and sociology (McCarthy, 1991). In relation to ELT, discourse analysis is very concerned with incorporating contexts in the teaching of English. It helps L2 learners of English improve their English by engaging them with texts which do not isolate sounds, words, and sentences. In other words, learners should learn English by incorporating real-life situations. As a sequence, English teachers are encouraged to include discourse when teaching the elements

of language, such as grammar, vocabulary, phonology, spoken, and written language.

3. Implications of Discourse Analysis and English Language Teaching

What should English teachers do when teaching grammar? Riggenbach (2002) says that in spoken language, for example, teachers can help their students focus on particular grammatical structures in natural speech and observe what is actually said, may or may not conform to the prescriptive rules. He further says that "students can observe grammatical structures (e.g. verb tenses, the passive voice, article usage) as they appear in authentic spoken discourse, and then make hypotheses about why particular grammatical choices were made instead of others, which can ultimately lead to an outlining of the "rules" that determine these choices.

Since the emergence of discourse analysis, there have been two types of grammar: sentence and discourse grammar. Sentence grammar is the "traditional" grammar which puts emphasis on, for instance, the uses of tenses without considering the contexts. Let's take present simple and past simple as an example. In sentence grammar, present simple is normally used for describing daily activities, general facts or truths, time table, and so on and so forth. It only deals with present time. Past simple, on the other hand, is basically used for past events or actions. It has nothing to do with present time. Now, let's take a look of the following example.

> "Yesterday I <u>went</u> to the market. It **has** lots of fruit that I <u>like</u>. I <u>bought</u> several different kinds of apples. I also <u>found</u> that plums <u>were</u> in season, so I <u>bought</u>   two pounds of them…. (McCarthy, 1991)"

This example shows us that as an English teacher, we should be knowledgeable of the "discourse" uses of present simple and past simple. That is, present simple is not only used for daily activities or general truths, but it can also be used to describe events happening in the past. In the example noted by McCarthy, "has" is in the present form whereas according to sentence grammar, it is supposed to be in past tense. This is what we call discourse grammar. In the example, the use of present simple is to high light "the market that has lots of fruit". In other words,

the speaker would like to emphasize that the market she/he went to has lots of fruit.

Another example of discourse grammar related to tenses is narrative. For example, when we tell people dreams we have when we are sleeping, we could use present simple and present continuous though the dreams happen in the past. Hence, teachers should tell their students that present simple and present continuous are not merely about present activities, but these two tenses are engaged with past actions in terms of narrative.

The next discussion is the teaching of vocabulary. How can discourse analysis be applied in teaching vocabulary? Nation (as cited in Riggenbach, 2002) explains that regarding vocabulary teaching, there is a difference between increasing learners' vocabulary and establishing learners' vocabulary. Increasing vocabulary deals with introducing learners to new words while establishing vocabulary involves building on vocabulary the students are learning by using it in meaningful contexts.

McCarthy (1991) suggests the following examples to teach vocabulary in the framework of discourse analysis.

HOW to get a contract

THE NORMAL route is to build up a following through live shows, send in tapes to record companies and then wait until someone "discovers" you. But there are other ways ...

(from *News on Sunday*, 14 June 1987, p. 22)

Source: McCarthy, 1991

Through the text taken from *News on Sunday*, teachers can teach learners how to use synonyms when writing a text. In the text, the word "route" has similar meaning with "ways" though in traditional ways of teaching vocabulary, the word "route" is not similar with "ways". Therefore, the role of teachers here is to teach

their students that words which do not have very similar meanings can be used to refer to the same word, e.g. the word "route" can be replaced by "ways" in order to avoid repetition in vocabulary use.

Discourse analysis is also applicable for phonology or pronunciation, but what should English teachers do to teach pronunciation through discourse analysis activities? In the beginning, teachers may start phonology and pronunciation class traditionally—that is phonology and pronunciation are taught in isolation without taking contexts into account. Then, teachers may continue the teaching by introducing natural English spoken uttered by native speakers. Teachers must bring in the natural speech of native speakers as discourse deals with real-life situations. According to Riggenbach (2002), initially, nonnative speakers of English are surprised when they are first introduced with natural English spoken by native speakers. In natural speech, words are not separated from each other. They are normally linked without any discrete. By having discourse analysis activities in the class, teachers may encourage the students to examine phonological features in the natural English spoken language.

McCarthy (1991) suggests the implementation of discourse analysis on phonology by, for example, discussing word stress and prominence. Traditionally, word stressis taught in isolation (salient in the citation form). In discourse, word stress has turned into prominence—that is word stress might change based on the contexts. For example, a word such as *Japanese* would have the following stress profile.

$$\underline{JA}^1pa\underline{NESE}^2$$

In isolation, number 1 shows the *primary* stress and 2 *secondary* stress. However, the prominence can be different, depending on the speaker's choice. Now, let's have a look at the following example.

Actually, she's japa<u>NESE</u>

a Japanese <u>SHIP</u>-owner's been <u>KID</u>napped

i thought <u>SHE</u> was Japanese, NOT <u>HIM</u>

When in contexts, the word stress of *Japanese* is changed. The second and the third example represent clear changes of word stress into prominence. Hence, what English teachers can learn from these examples is we should always bring in natural data or natural speech to the classroom as what happens in everyday talk or conversation might be different from what the learners learn in class. Exposing the learners with a lot of natural speech of native speakers of English is one of the best ways to teach discourse phonology and pronunciation.

According to McCarthy and Carter (1994), a traditional way of dividing language use applied in language teaching is *spoken* versus *written*. Some examples of spoken language that can be found in everyday talk are:

- telephone calls (business and private)
- service encounters (shops, ticket officers, etc.)
- interviews (jobs, journalistic, in official settings)
- classroom (classes, seminars, lectures, tutorials)
- rituals (church prayers, sermons, weddings)
- monologues (speeches, stories, jokes)
- language-in-action (talk accompanying doing: fixing, cooking, assembling, demonstrating, etc.)
- casual conversations (strangers, friends, intimates)
- organizing and directing people (work, home, in the street)

McCarthy, 1991

while examples of written language are as follows (McCarthy, 1991).

- instruction leaflet
- letter to/from friend
- public notice
- product label
- newspaper obituary
- poem
- news report
- academic article
- small ads
- postcard to/from friend
- business letter

The next discussion is "what can English teachers learn from the examples of spoken and written language?" "How do we teach spoken and written language in

the classroom as they have different features?"It is worth noting that teachers, first of all, should be knowledgeable of written and spoken grammar as each of them has different characteristics. For example, in spoken language, teachers should introduce expressions used incommunicative or language functions e.g. making an invitation, asking for and giving directions, request, giving opinions, giving suggestions, and so on and so forth. The expressions used in these situations are of course cannot be formed by using written grammar and the features they have are different from written language.

McCarthy (1998) suggests two ideas regarding grammar in discourse analysis: spoken and written grammar. He says that "we should never assume that if a grammar has been constructed for written texts, it is equally valid for spoken texts." He further says "some forms seem to occur much more frequently in one mode or the other, and some forms are used with different shades of meaning in the two modes." What McCarthy is trying to say is grammar for written language is actually different from grammar for spoken language. Thus, English teachers are encouraged to look at what really happens in the spoken language to detect significant differences between spoken and written language as most of English teachers, particularly in Indonesia, still use written grammar or written language to teach spoken grammar or spoken language.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, what English teachers can learn from discourse analysis to teach grammar, vocabulary, phonology, spoken, and written language is they, first of all, should master the traditional ones. Then, they could incorporate discourse analysis in the materials used in the classroom by bringing in a lot of authentic materials containing natural data, both spoken and written texts to let the students know the actual language use in real life situations. Teachers obviously should broaden their knowledge of discourse analysis in order to be able to integrate discourse in language teaching.

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