

A discourse approach to grammar and its use in reading and writing courses

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This paper examines the role of discourse in EFL learning and teaching. More specifically it looks at how raising discourse awareness and competence can help learners and teachers in the development of reading and writing skills.

The paper looks at two main points: the study of some grammatical features through a discourse approach and the application of discourse analysis to reading and writing:

The current situation

Because discourse analysis is left out completely in the current EFL curriculum at the department of English of the University of Algiers, we would like to focus on raising students' and teachers' awareness about its usefulness in both language description and language learning.

Over the years, observation of students' productive skills has shown that though students take a great deal of core subjects like grammar, reading and writing, they still have major difficulties to communicate effectively. As a matter of fact, when we examine their written productions, we can see that if students pay 'some' attention to grammar, they pay 'very little' attention to discourse considerations.

The traditional predominance of core grammar has always been reflected in theoretical linguistic descriptions and in the EFL classroom. However, this method is questionable nowadays. We often wonder why students do not apply or relate what they learn in the grammar class to their writing; this is

simply because grammar is taught in a vacuum and out of context of use. In other words students are not shown the discourse role or value of some important grammatical features. In the current curriculum, linguistics and language teaching in general tend to focus more on 'grammatical competence' (also called linguistic competence by some) and to leave out 'discourse competence' completely. These are obviously both needed for effective communication as they complement each other.

The reason we are looking into discourse is that we have observed in students writings lack or poor use of some discourse devices or structures, in addition to misuse of some grammatical features such as pronouns, articles, tense, word order, etc. Moreover, their writing often lacks cohesion and therefore coherence since the latter is the overall result of a good and cohesive structure of the text. One of the main reasons for the current situation is that grammar is taught as a completely independent component, for its own sake, as if it were an autonomous discipline, or like a content subject.

Such an approach has brought more harm than benefit since it has not fully helped students: knowledge of the rules gives students only some degree of accuracy which helps them in tasks and exercises to pass the tests in this very subject (and still many of them do not even achieve that) rather than help them communicate meaningfully (in speaking or writing).

Often a piece of writing may sound wrong though not many specific grammatical mistakes can be identified; this is because the structure of the whole text does not stand right.

Teachers put a lot of effort to help students develop grammatical competence but their performance, especially in writing, remains below the expected standards. To improve the present state of affairs a more discourse-oriented approach can help students develop their discourse competence for a better performance in various skills.

It is through observation of a piece of writing that we can discover the devices and mechanisms used to connect one sentence with another to make a text cohesive. Writing a connected piece of discourse is different from writing a series of clauses or sentences as part of a mechanical activity. In writing a text there are logical and linguistic links between the sentences that one should produce and learning how to create these links is an important part of learning how to write in a language. Students need to learn about the

devices that make a text cohesive. Some of them are EFL discourse related trouble-spots like tense, information structure, cohesive connectors. The latter are not much used when students speak in class (the only place where they speak English in the Algerian context and they speak mostly in single sentences). This is why students do not have much familiarity with the great variety of connecting words or expressions that are absolutely necessary in writing. For example, some are used to add an idea (furthermore, moreover etc), to show sequence (first, next, following that, finally etc) to show result (therefore, as a result, consequently etc), or contrast (however, nevertheless, on the other hand etc). So students need to be made aware of how these cohesive devices are used and how important they are as the interpretation of any item in discourse requires reference to other items.

One way of looking at all these devices is through reading texts in the reading class. They cannot be dealt with in the subject of grammar alone nor can grammar deal with mechanisms like ellipsis, substitution and others. Therefore an application of a discourse analysis approach must also involve reading and writing tasks.

Grammatical Competence versus Discourse Competence

Before looking at discourse analysis in reading and writing, we need to examine the relationship between grammatical competence and discourse competence.

Hymes (1972) explained that learners need to have not only the linguistic knowledge but also the contextually acceptable ways of communicating in different situations. He developed the concept of the so-called 'communicative competence' which consists of the interaction of grammatical, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic language components.

Following Hymes' idea, Canale and Swain (1980) specified that communicative competence includes grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. The interaction of these notions reflects the use of the linguistic system and the functional aspects of communication.

Our focus here being on the grammar - discourse relationship, we need to define each of the grammatical competence and discourse competence.

Grammatical competence

This term (initially used by Chomsky) is an umbrella term referring to the speaker's underlying knowledge of the language and includes abilities in phonology, morphology, syntax. EFL learners are expected to develop expertise in all of these to be able to understand English accurately and use it fluently.

The problem, however, is that in the current situation, focus is mainly put on language description: at different linguistic levels through different theories, and the subjects taught (phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics) are intended to develop their linguistic abilities; in other words their grammatical competence. But observation of our students performance shows there is a great need for developing discourse competence as well and from the first to the final year of their university studies.

Discourse competence

EFL learners need to develop discourse awareness and competence as the latter will give them the ability to understand and use inter-sentential structures and relationships more cohesively. As we will see further, in discourse, whether spoken or written and whether formal or informal, the rules of cohesion and coherence can be taught and practised on real data. This is what will help in holding the communication together in a meaningful way. In other words, in communication both comprehension (as in reading) and production (as in writing) require some ability to perceive and process stretches of discourse, and to formulate representations of meaning and information from referents and other discourse devices in both previous and following sentences. Students, in addition to knowing how to structure sentences should learn about the structure of discourse (and this is what should be emphasised).

This aspect is particularly important as it is the transition that will help EFL learners to go from merely controlling the structure of a single sentence to being able to control a well-organised sequence of sentences. This will provide the framework for structuring complex sentences and for using reference (pronouns, deixis etc), connectors (although, on the other hand, furthermore, nevertheless etc) which specify relatedness among sentences or sequences in texts.

Therefore, to be effective learners, students need to acquire a large repertoire of discourse markers or devices to express their ideas and teachers could easily integrate discourse instruction into grammar, reading and writing and raise learners awareness and competence in this specific subject, or else, they could introduce a new subject on discourse (or pragmatics)

Grammar and discourse as distinct but related subjects

Discourse analysis is vast in its scope (and is therefore said to be vague) as it refers to many things / aspects at the same time and is, in this way, different from the conventional studies of language. In pragmatic terms it is the study of language in use or in context but context itself is a broad and vague term: in its narrow sense it refers to text, situation, place, time and participants. In its broad sense it includes culture and society, two aspects overlapping with pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

The ideas about discourse presented here are not all new, but what we want to show is how discourse can be applied to teaching rather than remain at the level of language theory and description. Here we are concerned with the narrower sense of discourse ie the context of text, in relation to reading and writing. It should be noted, however, that a great number of discourse descriptions deal with communicative competence in speech such as speech act theory and conversational analysis (Austin 1962, Searle 1969), the cooperative principle or maxims of conversation (Grice 1975) and many others.

In fact even within the study of written discourse the subject is broad and contains many aspects worth looking at for both language description and language learning. Discourse analysis has become of great interest not only to descriptivist linguists but also to language teachers concerned with making learners better and proficient users of the target language. Their concern is how texts are structured beyond the sentence level and the grammatical-discourse processes that take place similarly or differently across languages.

If we look at grammar in its narrow conventional sense and compare it to discourse analysis as two different subjects, we can say, as noted above, that the first deals essentially with units of language in isolation and uses purely structural linguistic criteria and rules of well-formedness within the sentence, whereas discourse goes beyond the sentence. For Halliday and Hasan (1976) discourse analysis studies the language elements that can be defined in relation to other elements in the text (and context). Interest in such relations

has developed in descriptive linguistics but is also more and more developing among EFL teachers nowadays.

One must emphasise that discourse analysis is not fully separate from the study of grammar. However, discourse analysts are interested in a lot more than just linguistic / grammatical forms. They use language descriptions differently from those conventional grammarians.

The fundamental distinction is between forms and their functions in the text, so the two descriptions are different but related.

A discourse approach does not clash with what we are used to in conventional grammar, but just complements it. It is these relationships that need to be made explicit to the students to remedy some weak or poor uses in their writings: through observation of what really happens in texts ie from real language use by native writers (reading) and through concrete practice and application (writing).

In this endeavour, EFL learners and teachers need to keep aware that texts may have different mechanisms and realisations in different languages and therefore this may present problems for learners. So insights into analysis of EFL written discourse will be of great help.

One could say that grammar in its narrow or broad sense (inclusive of phonology, morphology and syntax) is context free or independent of context while discourse analysis is, as we said, concerned with forms, relations, interpretations and meanings in context. Discourse analysts are interested in the inter-relations of language structures and principles of language use and how the latter are grammaticalised or encoded in selected forms or structures of language. Discourse analysis concerns language in real use or how people use it in speaking and writing rather than in artificially created sentences.

The overall aim of discourse is to come to grips with how natural language (spoken or written) is used. With a better understanding of natural discourse we are better equipped to provide students with the tools, the material (data) and activities to improve their reading / writing skills.

Why the grammatical aspects of discourse

The domain of discourse like semantics and pragmatics, being rather abstract, we have selected and limited our concern to some aspects relating to grammatical entities as these can be captured and handled more concretely

by students without reference to cultural and social settings, though in the Hallidayan model the linguistic features of the text reflect the social context in which it is produced. And because discourse analysis is often considered to be, as noted earlier, an unspecific subject we want to show for practical needs the usefulness / necessity to adopt a discourse approach to teach EFL. Again, our focus is not on every aspect of written discourse but some, those which are relevant to language teachers and learners particularly, in the sense of grammatical practicability and adaptability to the teaching of English through reading and writing; particularly the discourse devices and markers, specific to English that can be used in various situations and contexts. What we want to show is that such an abstract subject can, in fact, be rendered or used concretely.

The usefulness of a discourse approach does not need to be proved. However, discourse awareness and competence need to be developed. Then the students could discover and handle some techniques used by native speakers / writers.

We have chosen aspects of discourse that represent a familiar and conventional level of language description: the grammatical level presented from a discourse perspective and how some of the features function in skills like reading and writing which, in a discourse framework, are closely tied up. We do not mean to deal with every grammatical notion contained in a descriptive grammar but only those which have discourse functions in the text such as: the cohesive devices as described by Halliday and Hasan (1976) containing: reference, ellipsis / substitution, conjunctions, verbal forms and modals, and information structure or theme / rheme.

Grammatically speaking cohesion contains pronouns, demonstratives, nouns and adverbs, ellipsis refers to absence of some units which are redundant, conjunction includes any word or phrase used to relate clauses or sentences, and information structure is word order.

Establishing such a parallelism is a way to simplify the subject and render it less abstract more accessible and familiar to the students. In this way the use of familiar terms such as pronoun, definite/ indefinite articles, demonstratives, adverbials, conjuncts, modals, clause etc, would be related to discourse terms like cohesive, reference, anaphoric, connector etc. Relating familiar terms with less familiar ones is to simplify the relatedness between grammar and discourse. Such a relation can help students see the practical side of using or applying grammatical knowledge to texts. Students usually go to

grammar classes to listen, understand the explanation or description given by the teacher but when it comes to applying or using it in real situations (reading and writing here), not everything learnt is used or put into practice. So introducing discourse to supplement the grammatical instruction through direct application will, no doubt, help students in this enterprise.

Applications to reading and writing

Discourse analysis does not provide teaching methods but insights and descriptions easy to apply on texts (such as in reading and writing). So teachers can easily decide about the best way to do this by gathering their own data (from different types of texts) and designing their own activities. With the help of various discourse analysis descriptions, such as Halliday and Hasan's (1976), Halliday (1985), Brown and Yule (1983) or others, they can select and discuss with their students the devices or markers used in texts through various exercises (see eggs below). So, the method to use to teach cohesive devices would rely essentially on written texts.

EFL learners are often more concerned with speaking, because for some knowing a language means being able to understand and speak it fluently ;Therefore, they do their best to listen to recordings of songs or other and only pay superficial or no attention to how things are written and how features that give continuity and cohesion operate in stretches of language longer than the sentence; This is why we insist that particular attention should be given to those features as they are greatly missing in students papers and are therefore important to learn..

A major problem for students lies with considering language as discourse ie as an entity where everything is closely related, as text. Students seem to manage fairly well with clauses but long sentences and texts are more problematic as grammatical forms or structures do not have single or separate functions. Fluent native speakers / writers of a language have repertoires of forms and structures from which they can choose to achieve a cohesive and coherent whole but t non - native speakers do not.

In reading, even with partial linguistic information, the learner can reach a reasonably good interpretation of the written text if he is aware of the discourse devices made available for him and uses them adequately; for instance he can discover how a particular text is constructed and how the writer has developed his argument through word order, reference, verb forms etc.

So, to help students improve proficiency, teachers can exploit the texts beyond sentences and their available clues, and a wealth of information can be extracted. Much attention should be given to what is involved in making sentences fit together, and to the different ways to teach the devices used like the grammatical linkers (therefore, as a result, consequently, furthermore, nevertheless etc) as the students tend to use only the most common ones (and, because, but).

These and other discourse features need to be taught by means of real data or authentic texts if we want to add more to what the grammar course teaches. Many options exist to teach the targeted ability and skills, as is shown below.

A basic requirement for effective reading is to be able to understand how the elements of text hold together from units of information to wholes: when reading in their first language, native speakers can do this unconsciously or effortlessly; however this ability or skill is not transferred into a foreign language, or the learners may transfer the wrong forms, devices or structures, and this may be problematic.

Algerian students who speak Arabic or Berber (as a mother tongue) very often have such problems as the discourses of Arabic and Berber function differently than English: word order or structure, cohesive devices, reference, ellipsis, substitution etc. As for French (as a second language), a great number of students use more spoken French than written one. So even though some similar features may exist between French and English, students do not transfer them. One may say that some of the problems students meet have inter as well as intra-language sources.

Some activities to highlight discourse aspects in reading and writing

Grammatical forms have been the main concern of language teachers for a long time and the main aim of grammar teaching should be understood as to enable its use by the learners, which is not the case when we observe the students writing at different levels of proficiency.

One must also note that incoherence in writing is more a matter of degree rather than a matter of either-or as in grammar. Students writings often show excessive recurrence of the same items, which is symptomatic of poor signalling of cohesion, and in this sense teaching the repertoire of cohesive devices (as in Halliday and Hasan 1976) can be a way to enrich the students' repertoire of use and develop their abilities in different skills. The degree of

difficulty of activities will vary according to the students level to bring them through stages to the targeted competence and performance, and texts of all types can be used according to interest: media, science, advertisement, literature.

Sentence structure and discourse features can be taught simultaneously with paragraph structure for unity and coherence.

The suggested possibilities are not exhaustive but rather guidelines that can help think of other ways to do practice on texts in the modules of reading and writing. The devices can be taught and practised in many ways (see egs below).

Examples of discourse devices

Cohesion: students can be asked to fill in blanks in a text choosing from a list of discourse clues (word or phrases) with a discourse function such as cohesive markers or other.

Reference: students can identify the referents of anaphoric forms.

Ellipsis and substitution: there are many types that can be used. For eg: modals 'they do', 'we should ' etc.

Word order and theme - rheme structure or information structure: Students can reorder jumbled clauses or sentences into the proper sequence with discussion of the logical order or possibilities inserting functional cohesive devices (selected from a list extracted by the teacher from the text and given separately).

Tense: this can be looked at in relation to the thematic continuity or development of events following a logical or chronological sequencing in a news article or other.

Various discourse devices or markers can also be extracted from different texts: the students can be asked to replace them in their respective gaps; they could also be given chunks or segments of text to relate with connectors. Students could try and discuss different possibilities according to meaning, using reference, conjunction, ellipsis, word order etc,

Information structure can also be looked at through exercises for fronting, focussing on elements which have prominence and finding such structures in texts; and tense-aspect and modals can be studied in texts for their different meanings and functions in relation to discourse elements referring to

happenings sequentially or chronologically; modals can also be shown for their role of substitution etc.

Students can exchange versions of their writings and suggest or add whatever discourse forms or devices they think are best with the help of the teacher.

The overall suggestion is to integrate notions of discourse analysis and activities in classes of grammar, reading and writing. But if teachers are reluctant, considering the amount of time and additional preparation work needed, they could favour the alternative of preparing and introducing in the curriculum a new course on discourse and pragmatics that will include theory and practice in the discourse of various skills such as speaking, reading and writing. Both options will require team preparation and co-operative work for fruitful results.

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