Discourse Analysis: Overview and Significance in Language Teaching in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

The main goal of language teaching is the learners' interaction competence, in both written and spoken form. Not all of EFL learners, nevertheless, are able to successfully communicate in English since they do not fully comprehend the knowledge of language and are not good at language use. Therefore, many linguists and researchers have investigated the teaching language on the ground of discourse analysis. This paper aims at studying the notion of discourse analysis (DA), its significance in language teaching in the EFL classrooms. It will shed light on discourse analysis and the relation between text, context and discourse as well as how discourse analysis is important in teaching English. Furthermore, the researcher discusses applications of DA in language teaching in EFL classrooms and suggests some effective ways of teaching to improve the quality of English language teaching and learning.

Keywords: discourse analysis, text, context, significance, language teaching.

1. Introduction

Language is considered as a powerful means of communication of human beings, especially in the current globalized era. The success of language learning is measured by the ability to carry out a conversation in that target language (Nunan, 1991). Accordingly, the communicative approach and its emphasis on practical communicative activities in language learning and teaching have paid more attention and this also contributed to the emergence of discourse analysis (Chambers, 2007). Discourse analysis, also called "discourse studies", was developed during the 1970s as an academic field. Originally, "discourse is taken from the Latin word "discursus" which means a "conversation" (McArthur, 1996). For centuries, there have been a number of scholars investigating discourse analysis, which refers to an approach studying the ways of using language, both in written texts and spoken contexts. Besides attempting to discover linguistic features in discourse at sentence level, it is important to make effort to interpret meanings of utterances the writer or speaker intend to convey in different social contexts. Paltridge (2000) argued "There is still, nonetheless, more ground that needs to be covered in order to provide a complete description of language use, as well as to help us understand why we make particular language choices and what we mean by them. This is what

discourse analysis is able to do for us". Moreover, from the experience of teaching EFL learners at my university for many years, I have found that many students have difficulty understanding English texts, speeches, conversations or even responding to simple utterances in some communication situations. This might be due to their limited knowledge of English use with the restricted exposure to different kinds of genres, speech events, and discourse types that occur in and outside the classroom. Therefore, this paper is conducted to achieve the aim of presenting the overview of discourse analysis and some relating concepts including text, context, and discourse; discussing the significance of discourse analysis in teaching English and making some recommendations for language teaching in EFL classrooms.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Overview of Discourse and Discourse Analysis

2.1.1. Definition of "Discourse"

Cook (1989) defined discourse as "stretches of language perceived to be meaningful, unified and purposive". Discourse was also viewed as "a continuous stretch of (especially spoken) language larger than a sentence, often constituting a coherent unit, such as a sermon argument joke or narrative …a discourse is a behavioural unit which has a pre-theoretical status in linguistics" by Crystal (1992). In addition, Cook (1992) admitted the prime focus of discourse analysis on language, nevertheless, he emphasized the importance of examining "the context of communication: who is communicating with whom and why; in what kind of society and situation; through what medium; how different types and acts of communication evolved". Sharing with this point of view, Nunan (1993) referred discourse to "the interpretation of the communicative event in context". It was also viewed as "the way in which language is used socially to convey broad historical meanings. It is language identified by the social conditions of its use, by who is using it and under what conditions. Language can never be "neutral" because it bridges our personal and social worlds" by Henry and Tator (2002).

In short, "discourse" in this research refers to the use of language for communicative purpose, hidden in texts, consists of several sentences which are perceived as being related some ways. It also depends on the communicative context.

2.1.2. Definition of "Discourse Analysis"

According to Brown and Yule (1983), "discourse analysis is the study of language use with the reference to the social and psychological factors that influence communication". Similarly, Stubbs (1983) claimed that discourse analysis is "concerned with language use in social contexts and in particular with interaction or dialogue between speakers". In the book "Discourse", Cook (1989) defined discourse analysis as "the study of how stretches of language used in communication assume meaning, purpose and unity for their users: the quality of coherence". In addition, Mc Cathy (1991) stated that "Discourse Analysis is a process in which the reader and listener's mind is working up on

the linguistic features of the utterance to grasp the intended meaning of the writer or speaker. Even if the utterances or sentences are ungrammatical, the discourse analysis makes us grasp the intended meaning". Later, Kroger and Wood (2000) also supposed that "discourse analysis is not only about method; it is also a perspective on the nature of language and its relationship to the central issues of the social sciences".

From the above concepts, it can be concluded that discourse analysis is generally the study of language use in a discourse, continued over a number of sentences, in a specific situational context, and within a framework of social and cultural conventions.

2.2. Overview of Text and Context

2.1.2. Definition of Text

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), "a text is a unit of language in use. It is not a grammatical unit, like a clause or sentence. A text is best regarded as a semantic unit: a unit not form but meaning". Brown and Yule (1983) referred the text to "the verbal record of a communicative act" and divided text into written and spoken form. Additionally, Crystal (1992) stated "Text: a piece of naturally occurring spoken, written, or signed discourse identified for purposes of analysis. It is often a language unit with a definable communicative function, such as a conversation, a poster". Similarly, text was defined as "a stretch of language, either in speech or in writing that is semantically and pragmatically coherent in its real-world context. A text can range from just one word to a sequence of utterances or sentences in a speech, a letter, a novel, etc", by Carter and Mc Cathy (2006).

In this paper, text is regarded as "language elements strung together in relationship with one another" (Halliday and Hasan, 1976), and it is also in complete in terms of communicative meaning

2.2.2. Definition of context

It is mentioned that context plays an important role in the analysis of discourse.

Hymes (1962) referred context to a limit of the range of possible interpretations, or a supporter of the intended interpretation. He stated that:

"The use of linguistic form identifies a range of meanings. A context can support a range of meanings. When a form is used in a context, it eliminates the meanings possible to that context other than those the form can signal; the context eliminates from consideration the meanings possible in the form other than those the context can support".

Moreover, Cook (1989) considered context as "knowledge of the world outside language" which helps us to understand and use it to interpret the messages both in spoken and written form.

Brown and Yule (1983) also claimed "the discourse analyst has to take account of the context in which a piece of discourse appears" and context was described as "the physical environment in which a word is used".

To sum up, context is the premise of the analysis of a discourse. It is known as "the situation giving rise to the discourse and within which discourse is embedded" (Nunan, 1993).

2.3. Relation between text, context and discourse

According to Sakie (1995), "a text, or a discourse, is a stretch of language that may longer than one sentence" and came a conclusion that discourse analysis is about "how sentences combine to form a text". Furthermore, Widdowson (2007) claimed that "… discourse to what a text producer meant by a text and what a text means to the receiver". It is noticeable there was difference in definition or feature of discourse and text from various linguists.

De Beaugrande (1980) argued:

"A text cannot be contextualized only shifted into a different context. A real text cannot be decontextualized that is removed from any context; we can only shift it into a different context, which is an ordinary transaction not just in language classrooms, but in most reports or discussions of what somebody has said".

By contrast, Widdowson (2007) stated:

"Discourse is text in use but that texts in corpora or other linguistic collections of language are not discourse. Texts need to be "brought to life" to become discourse. The texts which are collected in a corpus have a reflected reality they are only real because of the presupposed reality of the discourses of which they are a trace. This is decontextualised language which is why it is only partially real".

It is also understood that text is a physical product in terms of its being; meanwhile discourse is viewed as a process. And the meaning of text does not come into being until it is actively employed in a context of use whereas the meaning of discourse is derived through the reader's interaction with the text. The text is the observable product of the writer's or speaker's discourse. The observability of a text is a matter of degree. For example, in some written form or in the sound of recording, the readers will search the text for cues or signals that may help to reconstruct the writer's or the speaker's discourse. However, the readers can infer a different discourse from the text than the one the writers have intended. Therefore, the inference of discourse meaning is a matter of negotiation between writer/speaker and reader/hearer.

To conclude, it is not easy to distinguish clearly between the terms of text and discourse. In this paper, therefore, the respective roles of text, context and discourse (Cornish, 2008) will be developed and presented in the following table:

Text	The connected sequence of verbal signs and non-verbal signals in terms of which discourse is co-constructed by the discourse partners in the act of communication.

Context	The context (the domain of reference of a given text, the genre of speech event in progress, the discourse constructed upstream, the socio-cultural environment assumed by the text, and the specific utterance situation at hand) is subject to a continuous process of construction and revision as the discourse unfolds. It is by invoking an appropriate context that the addressee or reader may create discourse on the basis of the connected sequence of textual cues that is text.
Discourse	The product of the hierarchical, situated sequence of utterance, indexical, propositional and illocutionary acts carried out in pursuit of some communicative goal, and integrated within a given context.

Table 1: The respective roles of text, context and discourse

2.4. Significance of Discourse Analysis to Language Teaching

In the early 1970s, the communicative approach to language teaching has been paid more attention with the objective of stimulating learners to communicate by providing real opportunities for them to experience and practice communication in the target language. Hence, discourse analysis has emerged as a significant component in teaching language through the communicative approach and it has also attracted a number of researchers.

Olshtain & Celce-Murcia (2001) emphasized that the language teaching process goes in harmony with discourse analysis, and it must focus on strategies that facilitate learners' communicative production and strategies of interpretation

Besides, discourse analysis is supposed to investigate language forms and functions in social interactions, analyze how the language is utilized by native speakers within the social contexts to enhance language acquisition. In other words, discourse analysis concentrates on details of speech to convey the social meaning using the components of language represented in morphology, syntax, phonetics, and phonology (Berrocal et al., 2016).

It is noticeable that discourse analysts' concern is how to interpret the relationship of grammatical forms of utterances to given interlocutors and meanings expressed through discourse. Take the interrogative form in English as an example, it is mostly used to elicit information, but it can also be employed to make requests, offers, and suggestions as below:

- *"Have you visited England?" (question – elicit information)*
- *"Would you mind if I used the fax machine?" (request)*
- *"Will you dance with me?" (offer)*
- *Why don't we go fishing tomorrow? (suggestion)*

In addition, Danesh, Aghagolzadeh and Maftoon (2016) claimed that there was an improvement on reading comprehension after students were aware of critical discourse analysis and its elements, since they became more enthusiastic, and learned through activities more effectively.

Consequently, it could be concluded that critical discourse analysis represents a critical approach in teaching English to supports learners developing their language competence.

3. Recommendation

3.1. Application of discourse analysis to teaching English skills

Being an EFL instructor for some years, I realize that besides the knowledge of phonology, vocabulary, and grammatical patterns, learners need to comprehend discourse and social-cultural patterns so as to communicate in English well. In order to help students achieve this goal, exposing them to different kinds of discourse patterns in different interactions plays an important role in language teaching. This will be likely to happen if the teachers try to introduce authentic materials for teaching language skills and create many opportunities for student to take part in classroom activities. For instance, materials should be authentic spoken or written texts in the form of recordings and transcripts, speeches, fiction or non-fiction books, etc., which contain different discourse patterns. Authentic materials and class participations help them prepare for unexpected real-life situations.

3.2. Application of discourse analysis to teaching vocabulary

Thanks to discourse analytic techniques, it is easier for students to understand new terminology in a particular context. In EFL classrooms, teachers should provide learners with semantic contexts which are useful for understanding, or inferring the meaning of words, notions and sentences, and some rhetoric devices such as synonym and collocation. During their teaching, teachers can use exercises such as filling in the sentences with words they have leant, finding synonyms or matching collocations that are separated. These ways are undeniably helpful for students to memorize the new lexical items.

3.3. Application of discourse analysis to teaching grammar

Discourse analysts are interested in how discourse analysis can be applied in grammar teaching. In particular, they are interested in producing comprehensible communicative products, 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). It is common that some learners use a foreign language without being aware of its grammatical system. However, it is essential for learners to know grammar of a foreign language not only to produce discourse but also to perceive and understand discourse. For instance, there are more than forty conjunctive words and phrases, which might be difficult to teach (McCarthy, 1991). Moreover, when it comes to the spoken form of language, "*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 used when a participant of a conversation takes his turn to speak to link his utterance to what has been said before (Heriyawati, 2016).

4. Conclusion

In this paper, the concept and relevant items of discourse analysis as well as its significance in language teaching in EFL classes are presented. It is emphasized that EFL learners should acquire language knowledge as discourse that enables them to effectively communicate in the target language in different social contexts. This will be more easily achieved if EFL teachers offer authentic materials such as texts or conversations, then analyze and explain aspects of discourse analysis and ask students to complete the exercises relating to typical discourse structures as Burns (1998) suggested:

"*A methodological approach drawing on authentic discourse would also place learners in a less passive role, giving them greater independence to analyse and critique ways in which speakers may be socially constructed and positioned within spoken exchanges*".

In conclusion, discourse analytic techniques facilitate the language teaching to help learners acquire knowledge thoroughly and use the target language correctly and proficiently in both written and spoken circumstances.

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