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The Importance and Implementation of Discourse Competence in Teaching Languages

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Abstract Discourse competence in teaching languages is a multifaceted skill that plays a crucial role in effective language instruction. This abstract explores the concept of discourse competence, its components, and its significance in language teaching. It involves the ability to understand and produce language in context, taking into account factors such as cultural norms, social conventions, and communicative strategies. It encompasses a range of skills, including selecting appropriate language forms and registers, managing interactions in the classroom, and facilitating meaningful communication among learners. Teachers with strong discourse competence are able to create engaging learning environments where students feel comfortable practicing their language skills. They can effectively guide conversations, provide feedback, and encourage students to interact with each other in the target language. Discourse competence is essential for promoting language learning outcomes, as it enables teachers to tailor their instruction to meet the needs of individual learners and create authentic learning experiences. By fostering meaningful interactions in the classroom, teachers can help students develop their language skills in a natural and effective way. Discourse competence is a critical skill for language teachers, enabling them to create engaging and effective learning environments that support students' language development. Further research and training in this area can help teachers enhance their discourse competence and improve language learning outcomes for their students.

Keywords: discourse competence, Coherence and cohesion, language teaching, classroom interaction, language registers, cultural nuances, communicative strategies, scaffolding, feedback, language learning strategies, classroom dynamics, language development.

Introduction

Discourse competence refers to the ability to effectively understand and use language in different social and cultural contexts. It involves understanding how language functions beyond just its grammatical rules and vocabulary, including how it is used to convey meaning, establish relationships, and achieve communicative goals in various situations. It goes beyond just being able to speak a language fluently; it also includes the ability to interpret and produce language appropriately in different contexts. This includes understanding the cultural nuances of language use, selecting appropriate language registers, and being able to engage in meaningful

conversations. In language teaching, discourse competence is important because it enables teachers to create authentic learning experiences that reflect real-world language use. Teachers with strong discourse competence can effectively model language use, provide meaningful feedback, and create opportunities for students to practice and improve their language skills in context.

Discourse competence as a target both in ELT in general, and as a target in the syllabus, must be seen as a part of the overall language competence a student should accomplish in a given course. The introduction of the communicative competence concept and the communicative approach within language teaching would imply a focus on discourse competence on the same grounds as the other competences. However, such focus may be various. Teachers of English in the foundation course may utilise several approaches to develop discourse competence. But some may not focus explicitly on discourse competence at all. Since discourse competence is an important element of both the written and spoken skill it is highly appropriate that the L2-teacher is aware of this when working within both. By producing oral and written texts with texture and continuity the foundation course student should be able to reach a high degree of competence in the language. Central issues in this connection are to what degree the teacher must focus on discourse in the teaching and to what degree the textbooks have a potential in the development of discourse competence. Below I have discussed various aspects of the teaching of spoken and written discourse as seen through a selection of writings in the field.

Author`s preview

Teachers of English as a foreign language must focus on many aspects of communicative language learning. Among these aspects is discourse competence that has been included in recent curricula. Discourse in ELT, and in all modern language teaching, comprises different devices which may be visualized contextually both in spoken and written texts. In this part I will clarify and define what is meant by discourse competence in ELT. In explaining this, I will use the general term discourse and theories of discourse analysis.

Further, Canale & Swain (1980) introduced discourse competence as one out of four partial competences defining communicative competence : grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Canale (1983) explains grammatical competence as to the formal rules of the language comprising vocabulary, word formation syntax, pronunciation, spelling and linguistic semantics. Sociolinguistic competence refers to ‘the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts depending on contextual factors such a status of participants, purposes of the interaction and norms or conventions of interaction’ (Canale 1983:7).

Threshold Level 1990 specifies language functions – i.e. what people do by means of language - as an element of communicative competence. One of these language functions is structuring discourse. Threshold Level 1990 (van Ek & Trim 1991: 41-47) exemplifies strategies of structuring discourse. Such strategies include for example ways of opening or closing conversations, turn-taking, exemplifying, communication repair among other central elements of both written and spoken

discourse. Michael McCarthy (2001) defines the study of discourse as the study of language independently of the notion of the sentence. Such study involves the examining of the relationship between a text and the situation in which it occurs (op cit:48). McCarty explains that the terms text and discourse have been used interchangeably in the study of utterances, or set of utterances as part of a context. However, he points out the distinction between texts as products of language use (e.g. public notices, novels, academic articles or transcripts of conversations) and discourse as the process of meaning creation and interaction, either written or spoken (referred to as transactional and interactional). In this light, Nunan (1993) has argued the difference between the terms text and discourse, referring to text as any written record of a communicative event (spoken or written), and discourse as the interpretation of the communicative event in context (op cit: 6-7).

Jennifer Jarvis and Mark Robinson (1997) have developed the 'I:R:F' structure further. They were interested to see whether, in the interaction of the classroom, the teacher's feedback (F) moves as a discursial means of formulating and aligning meaning (op cit:214). This work is seen through a Vygotskian perspective (Vygotsky 1962) in which learning is seen as facilitated in the so-called "zone of proximal development" (ZPD). In this zone a learner is able to enhance his or her stage of conceptual development through instruction as well as imitation, and also interaction with more knowledgeable others (Jarvis and Robinson 1997:213; Ellis 1997:48-49). Through this research, which was conducted in university, the elaboration of the Focus, Build, Summarize pattern of discourse was presented. Through a clear focus a topic may be clearly articulated. Next the build sequence will help the pupil to create meaning and give the teacher the opportunities to appropriate what the children say in the target language and concepts. Summarize is of great importance in articulating clearly what the segment of the lesson has been. However, a successful achievement of such an approach may not always be evident in classes where discourse skills are difficult to accomplish. But it may prove important in the identification of an interactive discourse where the teacher supports the pupils in their learning (Jarvis and Robinson 1997:226-227). Here, the role of the teacher in the process of developing discourse is illuminated.

Classifications of discourse analysis :

Coherence and cohesion.

Cohesion refers to the ties and connections which exist within texts that link different parts of sentences or larger units of discourse.

It is actually a gum or glue that holds the paragraph together. It is the connectedness of structure. One sentence should be connected with the other sentence. It is actually a micro level of text. it has two types :

Lexical Cohesion

Grammatical Cohesion

A number of those types of Cohesion ties can be identified in the following paragraph:

"My father once bought a Lincoln Convertible. He did it by saving every penny he could. That car would be worth a fortune nowadays".

These are connections here in the use of words to maintain a reference to the same people and things throughout: “Father-he-he”, “Lincoln-it”. This is the perfect example of Cohesion.

Coherece Meaning

It is actually the unity of ideas. It is the connectedness of Ideas. It is a macro-level feature and ideas should be understandable. Coherence is not something that exists in language but something with exists in people. It is people who "understand" what they read and hear. They try to arrive at an agreement that fits their experience of the world. Here is a good example, adopted from Widdowson.

Her: That's the telephone

Him: I'm in the bath

Her: Ok

We can interpret the above dialogue with the help of conventional action and by our background knowledge that someone in the bathroom cannot attend to the phone. Speech Events are mainly concerned with what people say in different environments for example debates, interviews, discussions, quizzes, etc are different speech events. Speakers may have different speech roles as friends, strangers, young or old of equal or unequal status.

The background knowledge about the personality and environment gives a better comprehension for better interpretation of this discourse. Clearly, our understanding of what we read is not only based on what we see in language structure, but also on other things that we have in mind (knowledge structure) as we go about making sense of discourse.

A text which is *coherent* literally means that sentences or utterances and larger passages seem to ‘hang together’ so that they appear to be meaningful in a context. Apart from understanding the grammar and vocabulary of the text, we need to know how the sentences relate to each other. The interpretation of a text which is coherent depends largely on the text-forming devices such as ordering sentences or paragraphs, and the use of words with certain references. Moreover, in explaining discourse as ‘communication in context’, Nunan emphasises context as vital in coherence. He distinguishes context on one hand as linguistic – the language that surrounds and accompanies the piece of discourse, and on the other hand as non-linguistic or experiential in which the discourse takes place. The latter includes types of communicative events (jokes, lectures, conversations etc), topics, purpose of the event, setting, time, physical aspect and the participants and the relation between them. The context and the non-linguistic features of a communicative event (spoken or written) will make sense in terms of the ‘normal’ experience of each individual. This ‘normal’ experience will be interpreted locally and be linked to what is familiar and expected.

Cohesion is thus the set of devices which make a text coherent. Cohesion as ‘those linguistic devices that can be used to obtain texture both within and between sentences.’ Halliday & Hasan (1976) identified five different types of cohesion: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion . Nunan describes referential cohesion as words in the text which point backwards (anaphoric) as well

as forward (cataphoric) to the source of interpretation. Reference could for example be the use of personal pronouns e.g.

“James Olivier is a great chef. He has made TV-cooking popular.”

A third reference device is comparison which could be expressed through adjectives or adverbs, and serve to compare items within a text, e.g.

A: Would you like these seats?

B: No, as a matter of fact, I'd like the other seats.

Substitution refers to words within the text that can be substituted to avoid repetitions e.g.

“There are some new tennis balls in the bag. These ones have lost their bounce.” Ellipsis occurs when an essential structural element is omitted from a phrase and can only be recovered by referring to an element in the preceding text. The second statement in the example below cannot be interpreted without the first, e.g.

Sylvia: I like the blue hat.

Mary: I prefer the green.

Challenges in developing of discourse competence:

Developing discourse competence, which involves the ability to produce and understand coherent and cohesive texts in a given language, can be challenging for several reasons:

1. Complexity of Language: Languages have complex structures, including grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, that learners must master to create coherent texts.
2. Cultural Differences: Discourse conventions vary across cultures, so learners need to understand not only the language but also the cultural context in which the language is used.
3. Pragmatics: Understanding how language is used in different social contexts (pragmatics) is crucial for effective communication but can be challenging for learners.
4. Lack of Exposure: Limited exposure to authentic texts and interactions in the target language can hinder the development of discourse competence.
5. Lack of Feedback: Learners may not receive enough feedback on their language use to identify and correct errors in their discourse.
6. Vocabulary and Idioms: Mastery of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions is essential for producing natural-sounding discourse but can be difficult for learners.
7. Organizational Skills: Developing the ability to organize ideas cohesively and coherently in written and spoken discourse requires practice and guidance.
8. Discourse Strategies: Knowing how to use discourse strategies such as summarizing, paraphrasing, and linking ideas is important but can be challenging to learn.
9. Motivation and Engagement: Developing discourse competence requires sustained effort and motivation, which can be challenging to maintain over time.
10. Individual Differences: Learners have different learning styles, backgrounds, and experiences that can affect their ability to develop discourse competence.

Overcoming these challenges requires a combination of effective teaching strategies, exposure to authentic language use, opportunities for practice, and feedback on performance.

Implementing of activities in teaching process which develops discourse competence

1. Activities with a focus on discourse maintenance and coherence

strategies: students could audiotape unstructured conversations of selected native speakers in order to understand discourse maintenance and coherence strategies. The pupils could listen to each other's recordings and try to search for turns in the conversation e.g. where there are problems with comprehension. Can other steps be taken to get a "smoother" conversation or increase the comprehension? This could be developed further if the teacher provides the students with instruction and information about turn-taking conventions in English. For example, such conventions could be turns to gain the floor when somebody else is speaking. Further, this activity could reinforce strategies which have been observed and also include a practice in turn claiming strategies, backchannelling/attending skills and language functions such as e.g. disagreeing. Backchannelling could be difficult for non-native speakers as they may not be aware of listening/attending strategies (e.g. body language, eye-contact etc.). The students can observe native speakers as listeners or themselves as listeners in conversations. Another activity suggested by Yule and Gregory (1989) is to conduct survey interviews. This activity is not only to perform meaningful social interaction but also to focus on student nominated issues that can be audiotaped and presented in class. This may be especially helpful in ensuring comprehension of clarification requests and confirmation checks.

2. Activities focusing on the distinction between speaking and writing:

If students transcribe native speaker speech it will increase their awareness of how written and spoken language vary in English, especially as to the informal conversation. A transcription procedure may be used as a dictation in class where audiotaped speech should be written down, including fillers and other disfluencies which may be common in normal speech. This activity will turn the attention to normal native speaker speech patterns, characterised by repairs, repetition, reduced forms, and conventions of vocabulary and grammar usage which seem inappropriate in the written mode. The differences in speaking and writing can be taught through the textbook or the teacher, or the pupils may discover the differences themselves. What language learners can be surprised by is the frequency with which native speakers use contractions and ellipses, and how rarely full forms are used in informal speech. Another feature of spoken discourse that might be discovered in this deductive teaching is the use of discourse markers (e.g. "OK", "Yes", "Right") connected to the surrounding discourse. Activities of this kind could also illuminate how informal conversational contexts make use of vocabulary and grammar structures which are different from more traditional, prescriptive structures. The students may note down unfamiliar words and idioms, and discuss their meaning in context. In this way the language learners can learn that certain vocabulary items are used in informal speech but inappropriate in writing. (A typical example in English class is the Uzbek students' use of "wanna", "gonna", "gotcha" etc. instead of "want

to”, “going to” and “got you” in writing). Further, language learners may notice that ‘liberties’ can be taken in informal discourse versus in formal written contexts.c

Conclusion

In conclusion, discourse competence represents a multifaceted ability to understand and produce coherent and cohesive discourse. It involves not only a mastery of linguistic structures and vocabulary but also an understanding of the social and cultural conventions that govern communication in specific contexts.

Discourse competence enables individuals to navigate various communicative situations effectively, whether they involve casual conversation, academic discourse, professional interactions, or literary texts. It encompasses the skills needed to organize ideas logically, use appropriate linguistic resources, and adapt one's communication style to suit the audience and purpose. By studying discourse competence, researchers gain insights into how language is used to create meaning and establish social relationships. Moreover, educators can design instruction that helps learners develop the skills necessary to become competent communicators in diverse contexts.

In an increasingly interconnected world where effective communication is essential, discourse competence is a valuable asset that empowers individuals to engage meaningfully with others and participate actively in social, academic, and professional communities.

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