

Discourse Analysis in Small Doses: Meaningful Activities in the ELT Classroom

Sergio Iván Durand Sepúlveda¹, Bristol Inglés Profesional, Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico

Abstract

Discourse analysis is a linguistic approach which can provide alternatives in the language classroom. It is a different perspective of language which focuses on diverse language features and goes beyond grammar or syntax. Discourse analysis deals with how people are situated in a conversation and the roles each speaker plays; it can also highlight the different strategies people use to persuade others. Language is flexible and words alone do not depict the main message included in a sentence or text. Students learning foreign languages should be trained to find how context influences the meaning of a message in order to decode ideas accurately. During this process, students need to learn that the wording of a message and the structure are not the only features to take into account. Hence, teachers should provide activities which go beyond the simple structure of a text enabling students to analyse details and ideas contained in messages. Four activities are provided in this article in order to help teachers explore discourse.

Resumen

El análisis del discurso es un enfoque lingüístico que puede generar alternativas en el aula de lenguas. Se trata de una perspectiva diferente del lenguaje que se enfoca en diferentes características que distan mucho de la gramática o sintaxis. El análisis del discurso trata de cómo se posiciona la gente en una conversación y el papel que un hablante tiene en la misma. Asimismo, puede también resaltar las estrategias utilizadas para persuadir a alguien más. El lenguaje es flexible y las palabras por sí mismas no pueden reflejar el mensaje principal incluido en una oración o texto. Los estudiantes de lengua extranjera tienen que ser entrenados para encontrar las diferentes alternativas que cierto contexto puede modificar para decodificar la idea principal de manera exacta. Durante este proceso, ellos tienen que aprender que la elección de las palabras en un mensaje y la estructura no son las únicas características a tomar en cuenta. Por lo tanto, los maestros deben proveer a los estudiantes actividades que vayan mucho más allá de la simple estructura de un texto, permitiendo al estudiante analizar los detalles y las ideas contenidas en un mensaje. Este artículo presentará cuatro actividades de manera que maestros de varios niveles puedan explorar el uso del discurso.

Introduction

Discourse analysis is a linguistic approach that has been broadly used in social sciences over the past few decades. Even though it is based on linguistic principles, it has not been widely applied in language teaching (Mit'ib, 2010). If one goes through the literature of language teaching, one can find only a few studies in which discourse analysis provides classroom solutions for the language teacher (Mit'ib, 2010; Fernández Martínez, 2011). In my opinion, discourse analysis offers a wealth of opportunities for language teachers in order to provide variety and meaning to their lessons.

The study of discourse presents a different approach to the study of language itself. It does not analyse language structures; it analyses what the language is used for (Brown & Yule, 1983). Moreover, it analyses the communicative roles and identities that people have in interactions, as well as the intention of each participant (Van Dijk, 2008). Alternatively, it can also highlight the different strategies people use to persuade others in speech acts such as a political speech or advertising campaigns. Discourse is the way in which one conceives ideas through language and how these express meaning. The analysis of discourse is often thought to be hard to use in language classrooms and

¹ sivandurand@hotmail.com

teachers have assumed their students are perhaps not ready to apply it (Fernández Martínez, 2011; Lezberg & Hilferty, 1978).

In this article, I first state why discourse analysis should be considered in teaching English as well as the possibilities it brings. Secondly, I explain different ways it can be used directly in the classroom. Finally, I outline four different activities in which discourse analysis can be applied in a class and what skills or sub-skills can be developed.

Why Discourse Analysis?

The wording and the structure of a text are not enough to determine what a text intends to mean; each text or message is produced in a certain place, an exact moment and by a specific person. These features add meaning to the message itself. According to Nunan (1993), discourse analysis focuses on “text forming devices...with reference to the purposes and functions for which the discourse was produced, as well as the context within which the discourse was created” (p. 20). This means that teaching grammar and vocabulary in a class may not be enough. That is one reason why teachers should try to help students to analyse social situations or contexts that affect the meaning of their speech. According to Van Dijk (2015), language users ought to understand their context so they can relate to the communicative circumstances meaningfully: “in order to speak or write appropriately, language users (first) need to analyse and know the relevant environment, and more specifically the social and communicative situation, and then adapt the properties of text or talk to that situation” (p. 4). Discourse analysis can help students in this regard.

Students at pre-intermediate and intermediate levels, as stated in Lezberg and Hilferty (1978), may have mastered the grammar and syntax, but more often than not, they still regard language as a simple system to decode isolated words or sentences, ignoring the fact that language is used in a certain context with a specific function. Students are usually unaware of the wide range of opportunities and options they have to use concerning certain words or phrases in different contexts.

Since teachers at basic levels sometimes face difficult circumstances due to students’ linguistic and educative background, they base their teaching on grammar and vocabulary, ignoring often functions and the context where a sentence can be uttered. Mit’ib (2010) holds that “Since sentences are taught apart from their contexts, the students can never understand the functional value of the particular language item they have learned” (p. 40). Some students struggle to analyse a message beyond clause or sentence level which prevents them from developing their communicative skills or a clearer understanding of language. For instance, English teachers are often asked about the meaning of an isolated word without mentioning a context; this is because students may organise language in small units of meaning such as words, phrases, or chunks. Students know language structures; some students—usually the keen ones—can recite grammar rules, but when asked about the general idea of a text, they sometimes do not know how to answer. Hence, using discourse analysis goes beyond deducting a grammar rule from a text as it can actually provide teachers opportunities to create a real-life atmosphere in class and develop other communicative skills, such as listening and speaking.

Apart from its communicative benefits, discourse analysis can also provide an opportunity to develop critical thinking. Fernández Martínez (2011) points out that “the classroom offers tangible ways of interpreting contemporary culture; it is an excellent forum for teaching discourse analysis and for making students aware that there is a complex world out there to be analysed” (p.3). When students become critical thinkers of daily situations, they start questioning other more relevant issues in their education, which allows them to straightforwardly understand the world they live in.

Discourse Analysis in ELT

The challenge for teachers at pre-intermediate level and higher levels is, then, to make learners aware of the meaning behind a message “with reference to the purposes and functions”, by planning activities that analyse “for which the discourse was produced, as well as the context within which the discourse was created” (Nunan, 1993, p.20). Students at these levels should be encouraged to go beyond simple structures, and they need to be able to state the position that the producer of the message takes according to the meaning it creates.

Several coursebooks today, especially those that deal with exam courses (e.g., *Complete* series by Cambridge University Press or the *Directto* series by Macmillan), contain discourse analysis-inclined activities which try to go through a text by using questions like: *Who’s the author of the text? Why is s/he writing this? Where can you see this text?* These questions appear before or after reading or listening tasks. Usually used only as a warm up, their answers may not provide a full understanding of the function and context. Additionally, this may occur in a large class where only one student may give the right answer and the rest just support it. A more thorough analysis could be carried out in which students become aware of all the meaningful features of the message apart from the message itself. The challenge would be then, to show if students are aware of the function and the context by performing a sketch, drawing a picture, or creating a story. By showing they can fully comprehend the message during the activities, students can be trained to repeat the process and reflect on the context and function of a message every time they face a written or spoken text, rather than just examining the structure. Several activities can be designed and some of them will be described in the following sections.

Four Activities

In this section, I will present four activities which can be used in relation to discourse analysis in the language classroom.

First Activity

The first activity focuses on creating and performing a sketch from analysing road signs and notices, making the students reflect on the purpose of a sign. Reading and understanding short messages is a common reading comprehension task at B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference of Languages (CEFR). This is a level in which students are supposed to “understand routine information and articles, and the general meaning of non-routine information within a familiar area” (Cambridge, 2017). Teachers usually ask students to underline key words and think of the meaning of the message, but a detailed analysis of the text may not be done. A deep examination of the context can be fundamental to fulfil a wider understanding of the short message: road sign, advertisement or notice. Students should be encouraged to analyse further,

so they learn to look for the meaning contained in the actual “social situation”. In Figure 1 there is a notice that can be found on a bus in Dublin, Ireland. A task often found in textbooks would be to show students three different explanations of the text and let learners choose the right one. Some would immediately go for the one that shares the same wording with the message. Others may get the right answer just by choosing it at random. On the other hand, if we make students reflect on the context, they may understand the message at a deeper level.



Figure 1. A notice found on an Irish bus (<http://www.buseireann.ie/inner.php?id=360>).

Procedure

Students are asked to read the notice and then work in pairs to prepare a short dialogue of the moment at which the notice was planned by the company’s publicity managers. This task can also start with a common question like: *Where would you see this notice?* Students then need to analyse why the message was written and write a dialogue between two people that shows a more profound knowledge of the situation and context. It is clear that the main reason for the notice to be placed on a bus is to attract a larger number of young clients, so a dialogue which includes two company employees planning to attract more students can be performed. Teachers should encourage students to be creative and think of fun situations as long as they stick to the meaning of the message. Teachers do not have to prepare much. They only need to download some similar notices from the web. One of the benefits is that the teacher gets students to speak in a self-controlled activity in a fun way.

Second Activity

This activity involves role-playing a conversation depending on who the discursive subject and the receptor are, adapting their discourse according to the listener. This is the scenario: Would you tell your boss you crashed his/her car in the same way as you would tell your wife or husband? How about to your father-in-law or mother-in-law? Students need to realise that a message itself contains more information than what is seen or heard at simple levels. These details help to construct a discourse which makes the meaning easier to understand.

Procedure

Divide the class into two groups and with the aid of a projector and a power point presentation (or just some cardboard notices), the teacher projects a message to a group of students while the other group waits outside the classroom or stands in a place where they cannot see the message. Messages must be about uncomfortable situations or confessions like: "I crashed your car", "I lost your favourite book", or "I cannot attend your birthday party". After that, students who saw the message would choose from a basket or hat a pre-designed role card: boss-employee or son/daughter-parent. They act out the confession of the uncomfortable question with their partner and take on the pre-designed role. The student listening should guess the relationship they have with the student speaking according to the hints they hear, not the message. This way, students can become aware of all the meaningful details that are included in a conversation- outside the main information- in order to construct meaning. They need to pay attention not just to the actual message but also to all the details that build it. This kind of activity helps students' listening skills as they are trained to listen for details that enable them to get the meaning in speech.

Third Activity

This activity consists of discussing the identity of a speaker/writer relating their discourse to a picture. The French philosopher Michel Foucault (1973) believed that everything is discourse, every little aspect of our lives, such as the way we dress, the kind of music we listen to, etc. Discourse gives a message to the world and we cannot escape from this reality. Taking this into account, we can get a great deal of information about a person by just observing a picture.

Procedure

This activity entails analysing a piece of discourse (spoken or written) of a person and matching it to a picture that the teacher has prepared beforehand. These pictures should be carefully selected conforming to the details given by the discourse producer. The following example is taken from the coursebook *Global Intermediate*:

Coming in from the cold

Alaskan blogger talks about what it's like living in the north of the 64degrees latitude:

I'm from California originally. I remember getting off the plane from California and the official airport thermometer read -47.5 degrees Fahrenheit. I don't mind the cold too much now...but I suffer from the long dark hours of winter. Ian Herriott in Alaskan life in the Anthropocene Epoch (Benne & Clandfield, 2012, p.35)

By analysing the details of the speaker's discourse, students now have to choose a picture (see below Figure 2) and then they need to justify their choice: *Who is Ian? Why?* The end answers are not necessarily important. What becomes more relevant is the discussion students have when they decide which picture is Ian's. By analysing aspects like "He said he doesn't mind the cold, so I think Ian is picture A", students would focus on the context and function of the message rather than on the wording.



Figure 2. Who is Ian? (<https://www.pinterest.com/ClaraGamb/mens-shirts/>, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/01/06/us/winter-weather>).

An extended version of this activity may take students to a more common grammar practice, such as discussing what the person does every day, or what the person did yesterday or what the person has done over the last two weeks. The students always need to justify their choices with a meaningful aspect in the spoken discourse or in the picture. Thus, grammar practice does not have to involve filling the gaps in worksheets or other typical exercises. It can be closely connected with meaning, showing students that even if a structure is important, it is the meaning of it which makes it relevant.

Fourth Activity

Activity 4 is at an elementary level. Using small pieces of language, students can be aware of the importance of analysing discourse within a context and its meaning. In this activity, teachers take a sentence that can be used to review a grammar point that is being used and get students to create the context of it.

Procedure

The teacher writes a sentence on the whiteboard, for example: "We don't like pizza" (probably as a review of present simple). Then the teacher makes students work in pairs and asks learners what the previous question in the conversation was, related to the example sentence. Students may answer: "Do you like pizza?" The teacher keeps encouraging students to say the previous sentence until they build a short dialogue that ends up with the first sentence. The following is a conversation that the students may come up with:

- A: Are you hungry?
 B: A little bit, why?
 A: Let's eat something.
 B: Sure!
 A: Do you like pizza?
 B: **We don't like pizza.**

The teacher writes another sentence and this time the teacher lets students work independently on their short dialogues. Students present their dialogues to the class. During this activity, students reflect on the meaning of certain grammar points and find a possible context of each structure. With this activity, the students may learn that

language is surrounded by a given context and that the same message can be situated in a wide range of situations.

Conclusion

Language is alive. It is not a compound of only words. Meaning can be found at many different levels, for example in the context, in what the sentence is being used for or even in information we are leaving out. Understanding language as a set of fixed structures may prevent students from developing their communicative skills along with their capacity to express complex ideas. Taking into account all the aforementioned ideas, teachers need to guide their students to a variety of language features. Training students to find all the other meaningful pieces of a message that are not only found in words would lead them to more meaningful communicative experiences. On the other hand, students have to feel involved in what they are learning. By creating real-life tasks and encouraging them to develop their social awareness, language learners will find language lessons more attractive and meaningful. Moreover, they will cultivate critical thinking to use in all aspects of their education and life. So, discourse analysis could provide life-long abilities which may lead students to a more successful academic life.

To conclude, I encourage colleagues to take one of these activities to their classrooms and see how discourse analysis may provide a realistic and meaningful atmosphere that a language lesson needs. Discourse analysis may seem complex to use, but the purpose of this article is also to show teachers why it can be useful and how easy and meaningful these activities can be for the ELT classroom.

References

- Brown, G. & Yule, G. (1983). *Discourse analysis*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Cambridge English (2017). Cambridge English Teachers. Cambridge. *What is the CEFR?* Retrieved from https://www.cambridgeenglishteacher.org/what_is_this
- Benne R. R., & Clandfield, L. (2010). *Global intermediate: Student's book*. Oxford, U.K.: Macmillan.
- Fernández Martínez, D. (2011). *Introducing discourse analysis in class*. Newcastle, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Foucault, M. (1973). *L'ordre du discours*. Paris, France: Gallimard
- Lezberg, A. & Hilferty, A. (1978). Discourse analysis in the reading class. *TESOL Quarterly*, 12(1), 47-55.
- Mit'ib, M. A. (2010). Discourse analysis and English language teaching: A functional perspective. *Journal of Al-Qadisiya in Arts and Educational Science*, 9(3-4), 39-50.
- Nunan, D. (1993). *Introducing discourse analysis*. London, U.K.: Penguin.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (2008). *Discourse and context: A socio-cognitive approach*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Dijk, T. (2015). Context. In K. Tracy, C. Ilie, & T. Sandel, (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of language and social interaction* (pp. 1-11) New York, N.Y.: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.