

A Study of Discourse and Pragmatics in Language Teaching

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Abstract

Discourse and pragmatics which are useful factors in ELT should be paid special attention to. This essay aims to illustrate that both discourse and pragmatics are crucial to effective language teaching. The first part will be focused on discourse and pragmatics, attempting to describe the principal aspects of discourse and pragmatics which influence language teaching. In the second part, two pieces of published ELT materials which both focus on “reading” will be evaluated, analyzed and compared, through which, something in language teaching associated with the discourse and pragmatics skills might be gained. This essay has reflected on the ways in which discourse and pragmatics theories can be actually applied in language teaching. The evaluation of the two pieces of material can improve a better knowledge and more proper application of their theories so as to achieve effective teaching outcome.

Keywords: Discourse and pragmatics; English language teaching; Evaluation; Teaching outcome

1. Introduction

Discourse and pragmatics which are two important and useful factors in ELT (English Language Teaching) should be paid special attention to. According to Brown and Yule (1983, p.1), “The analysis of discourse is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes of functions which those forms are designed to serve in human affairs.” While Ellis (1998, p.719) claims that “Pragmatics is the study of how language is used in communication.”

This essay aims to illustrate that both discourse and pragmatics are crucial to effective language teaching. As Brown & Yule and Ellis explain, the fields of discourse analysis and pragmatics focus on how language is used in real-life situations. Therefore, this essay is going to explore in what aspects discourse and pragmatics impact on language teaching. It will be divided into two main parts. The first part will be focused on discourse and pragmatics, attempting to describe the principal aspects of discourse and pragmatics which influence language teaching. It will firstly introduce the general idea of what discourse and pragmatics are. Then, it will pick some points of discourse and pragmatics which are relevant to language teaching such as cohesion and coherence of text and cooperative principles, as well as some examples. In the second part, two pieces of published ELT materials which both focus on “reading” will be evaluated, analysed and compared, through which, something in language teaching associated with the discourse and pragmatics skills might be gained.

2. The Principal Aspects of Discourse and Pragmatics as They Impact on Language Teaching

2.1 What are discourse and pragmatics?

2.1.1. Discourse

Discourse is naturally occurring stretches of language, such as conversations, interviews, speeches, and newspaper articles. Discourse can be both spoken and written language. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000, p.4) suggest, “a piece of discourse is an instance of spoken or written language that has describable internal relationships of form and meaning (e.g., words, structure, cohesion) that relate coherently to an external communicative function or purpose and a given audience/interlocutor. It is contextualized language – that is to say, language as it is actually used.”

Besides, it leads us to a distinction between sentence and utterance. A sentence is different from an utterance as a sentence has no context but an utterance is contextualized language which is actually used. So discourse consists of “utterance”. The study of discourse or so-called “discourse analysis” is concerned with “how language users produce and interpret language in context in both spoken and written. It also involves examining the relationship between a text and the situation in which occurs (McCarthy, 2002, p.48)”.

2.1.2 Pragmatics

Pragmatics has been defined in various ways. An appealing definition of pragmatics has been offered by Crystal (1997, p.301), who proposes that pragmatics is “the study of language from the point view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication.” In other words, pragmatics is defined as the study of communicative action in its socialcultural context. It reflects the intended meaning rather than literal meaning. As Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000, p.2) suggest, it deals primarily with the situational aspects of messages.

When it comes to the issues of any analytic approach in linguistics which involves contextual considerations, it necessarily belongs to pragmatics. Therefore, “doing discourse analysis certainly involves doing syntax and semantics, but it primarily consists of doing pragmatics” (Brown and Yule, 1983, p.26).

In reality, human communication is more than a sum of vocabularies, grammar rules or sentence structures. This is because sometimes when people communicate they tend to convey more than what the words and phrases in those utterances might mean, or in other words, there is a hidden meaning behind the utterance.

For example: Jess: Do you fancy me, Tony?

Tony: I like you, yeah...

In this context, Tony doesn't answer the question directly. He uses another similar word to replace the word “like”. In terms of semantics, “fancy” and “like” share the same meaning to some extent. But in terms of pragmatics, the phrase from Tony simply functions as a way of saying “I just regard you as a good friend. I do not love you as you expect. I say so because I do not want to hurt you.”

As Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000, p.20) point out, any utterance, therefore, can “take on various meanings depending on who produced it and under what circumstance”.

Pragmatics studies the context within which an interaction occurs as well as the intention of the language user. Who are addressees? What is the relation between speakers/writers and hearers/readers? When and where does the speech event occur? It also explores how listeners and readers can make inferences about what is said or written in order to arrive at an interpretation of the user's intended meaning.

We could have another example to prove this theory.

“Where are you going tonight?” is a very simple sentence. When it is put into different context, it turns into an utterance with different indications. If a mother asks this question to her teenager daughter who goes out very late every night, it could be a kind of criticism and warning. If a boy asks this question to a girl he loves, it means he wants to invite her if she has no plan. If a person asks this question to his/her colleague after work, it can be polite regards without any intention.

As Celce-Murica and Olshtain (2000, p.22) point out, “in exchanges that take place between language users

from different social or cultural groups or different linguistics groups, miscommunication can result from lack of shared knowledge of the world and the appropriate target behavior.” In this situation, pragmatics, in fact, leads language teachers as well as learners to communicative competence, which goes far beyond linguistic competence. Therefore, pragmatics must be taken into account in language teaching. When it comes to teaching reading, teachers are responsible not only to help students understand the literal meaning of some key vocabularies, phrases, and sentence structures, but also to help them comprehend the hidden meaning of articles in given context.

In addition, there are some principal aspects in the discourse analysis and pragmatics which are relevant to teaching, such as cohesion and coherence and cooperative principles. These aspects would be introduced briefly in the following part.

2.2. The principal aspects of discourse and pragmatics

2.2.1. The cohesion and coherence of text

In language teaching, two fields in discourse analysis have received particular attention. They are *cohesion* and *coherence*.

Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000, p.7) point out, “the use of various cohesive ties to explicitly link together all the propositions in a text results in **cohesion** of the text.”

For example:

Look after the children. Let them have a good rest.

-- *them* refers back to *the children*, thus imposing cohesion on the two sentences.

This is one form of cohesive device which is called ‘Reference’. This form deals with pronouns, repeated forms, possessive forms, demonstratives and so on.

In English language, cohesion has some other devices like substitution, ellipsis and conjunctive relations. Each piece of text must be cohesive with the adjacent ones for a successful communication. Some of the examples below are taken from Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000, p.53).

1.Substitution (i.e. nominal *one(s)*, verbal *do*, clausal *so*):

A: Did Mum bring the blue vase?

B: No, she brought the red one.

Here “one” replaces “vase”, and they form a structural and lexical/semantics tie and are coclassificational (i.e., refer to the same class of entities) but not coreferential.

2.Ellipsis (or substitution by zero)

A: Who wrote this article?

B: Bill.

In this context, “Bill” - standing alone without a predicate - functions elliptically to express the entire proposition, “Bill wrote the article.”

3.Conjunction

Christmas is coming; however, the weather seems very un-Christmaslike.

The conjunctive adverb “however” signals a tie between the clause that follows and clause that precedes it. This case means that the two events are somehow in conflict or signal a counter expectation.

In addition to cohesion, “**coherence** contributes to the unity of a piece of discourse such that the individual sentences or utterances hang together and relate to each other.” (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000, p. 8)

For example:

-- Is Mary busy?

-- I can see the two children are going to bed.

We assume from this that Mary has two children and therefore the response is an implication that Mary is

busy.

Cohesion and coherence could be useful in teaching EFL especially in teaching reading, as it will lead students to make their language production more cohesive and to facilitate them to interpret new texts more easily.

2.2.2. Cooperative principle (four maxims)

Before we go to discuss the principle of cooperation, we should notice a very important point here. Cooperative principle is so important for language teaching, because its practical realizations are culturally specific while the principle itself is universal. In other words, different cultures cooperate in communication in different ways. Grice (1975) gives us some hints below in such a principle.

1. Maxim of Quantity – it is about amount

For example:

-- Mary, have you read the novel and taken notes of it?

-- I have read it.

In this conversation, Mary's contribution is not as informative as required. She doesn't answer the question about 'take notes'. It is an important principal aspect of pragmatics for language learners as it relates to culture and is regarded as part of communicative competence.

2. Maxim of Quality – to tell the truth

For example:

-- How about my grandpa?

-- He is dying.

In this conversation, the answer is telling a truth which conforms to the principle: try to make your contribution one that is true. But from cultural perspective, it is inappropriate to tell this truth. Therefore, there is a difficulty when it seems necessary to lie – the so-called “white lies”. We would face such situations quite often. But it varies in different culture.

3. Maxim of Relevance – to say something which is relevant to conversation

For example:

-- I cannot stand Mr. Smith.

-- (pause) Nice weather, ah?

In this conversation, the response is completely irrelevant of the statement before. It does not conform to the principle requirement. But from the irrelevance, we could infer at least two hidden meanings: 1) I don't agree with you. 2) I don't want to talk about the subject.

4. Maxim of Manner – to try to speak in a way which is easy to understand

For example:

--- Do you know that girl?

--- Yes, her name is Mary, M-A-R-Y.

In this conversation, the answer is clear and brief. With this principle, you will never mislead those who you communicate with.

Language is not a calculating process, simply adding vocabularies and phrases together. It needs to be understood in the actual context in order to communicate well. The same theory would also be applied in language teaching, here reading specifically. Most of the articles or texts are not independent from the outer world, or it could be said that they are related to the human world in real life. Whether the materials are interviews, conversations or speeches, effective reading, understanding as well as teaching cannot work without effective discourse and pragmatic analysis.

3. Teaching Reading

3.1. The nature of reading

“The processing of reading is much more complex than just decoding symbols into sounds, identifying letters and words placed in a certain order and making sense of them. When we read, we try to understand the message the writer of a text wants to communicate”(Pilioura, 1998, p.3).. This communication, unlike speaking, is quite complicated since the writer is not present during this interaction. The readers thus are supposed to get the pragmatic meaning of the discourse to avoid any possible misunderstanding. In this interactive rather than passive process, readers need to reach the implicature of the discourse which is the central of the utterance by decoding the meaning of words. In order to achieve this, the reading processing can be defined as different types:

3.1.1. Bottom-up processing

Sometimes, learners may know the background information beforehand, but they may still have problems with grammar and vocabulary recognition—or they may not attend to conjunctive ties and therefore have difficulty in synthesizing information across sentences and paragraphs. This is a “bottom-up” processing involved, As Carter and Nunan (2001, p.227) defined, “it helps readers to use phonological and verbal cues from the input to attend to micro-features of a text such as the form of individual words and grapheme/ phoneme connections.”

This process calls for the explicit explanation of possible difficult words and expressions or grammar points in advance to assist learners with a better understanding of the text.

3.1.2. Top-down processing

It is quite familiar for the learners that they know every word in the reading materials, but still fail to understand the whole passage. So, what does this tell us about reading? According to Carter and Nunan (2001, p.227), “the most obvious point is that reading is about a lot more than ability to decode isolated words. Understanding is greatly assisted when we know something about the topic that the words relate to. It helps reader to use background knowledge and expectations about what is being said or written to understand a message.” This is a “top-down” processing involved.

This process tells us that the background information is always necessary to provide before learners start to read. It is easier for them to understand the meaning the writer wants to transfer by just fitting in the information they have already know in reading.

It is unlikely that these two processes are separately used to understand one text. Teachers tend to help learners combine those two to achieve more effective outcome. “Overreliance on either mode of processing to the neglect of the other mode has been found to cause reading difficulties”(Carrell, 1988, p.239).

3.1.3. Interactive processing

Hedge (2001, p.188) concludes, “in recent years the term ‘interactive’ (Carrell, Devine, and Eskey 1988; Eskey 1988; Grabe 1993) has been used to describe the second language reading process”. Then how to understand the term could be a crucial step for effective and efficient teaching focusing on reading. In interpreting the term, I prefer the description from Hedge (2001, p.188) which regards “interactive” processing as a term describing “a dynamic relationship with a text as the reader ‘struggles’ to make sense of it”. In other words, it can be seen as “a kind of dialogue between the reader and the text (Hedge, 2001, p.188)”, or even “between the reader and the author (Widdowson, 1979a)”. Therefore, whether a teacher can carry out an “interactive” reading class is a key point to establish a successful teaching for reading. Under such a circumstance, perhaps, we can also infer that whether a piece of material is appropriate and well-set should, to some extent, depend on whether it can organize an “interactive” class successfully.

On the other hand, Hedge (2001, pp.46-52) also points out, pragmatics competence and discourse competence are two main components of communicative and interactive language ability. The two ideas above, thereby, just coincide with what we are going to discuss – the evaluation and reflection on the two pieces of material, with particular regard to the extent to which they are likely to develop discourse and pragmatic skills.

3.2. The criteria of reading

Furthermore, in order to find out fundamental and strong views to support the following evaluation and reflection on the two pieces of material chosen, several criteria could be concluded for the following task:

According to Hedge (2001, pp.193-194), a successful teaching material for developing students' discourse and pragmatic skills should be:

- providing extensive reading which may help students to build a knowledge of vocabulary and an awareness of the features of written texts
- choosing texts and designing tasks to provide support for what the learners already know
- providing regular use of analytical activities to draw students' attention explicitly to some linguistic features of texts
- preparing the students some specific language difficulties they might encounter
- making notice of discourse signals such as “moreover”, “whereas”...
- encouraging students to develop strategies for guessing word meanings from contextual clues and background knowledge
- enabling the texts to be related to the real world

4. The Evaluation and Reflection on the Two Pieces of Material

Cunningsworth (1984) suggests that there are very few teachers who do not use published course materials at some stage in their teaching career. And the ability to evaluate teaching materials is a very important professional activity for all EFL teachers. The following part would be an evaluation of two pieces of material which both focus on one area – ‘reading’, specifically, two pieces of intensive reading material from college English textbooks in China, with particular regard to the extent to which they are likely to develop discourse and pragmatic skills.

The college English textbooks compiled and published in China usually have one piece of intensive reading material called a text and one or two more pieces of extensive reading material called reading passage(s) or supplementary reading in each unit. Intensive reading often means careful reading. Its text is shorter and has more difficult words and more complicated sentence structures in it, with the goal of complete and detailed understanding. Extensive reading, in contrast, is generally involved in reading large amounts with the aim of getting an overall understanding of the material. Readers pay more attention to the meaning of the text than the meaning of individual words or sentences. As the students are less exposed to English except English classroom in China, they are encouraged to do a lot of extensive reading to improve their language competence. That is why the English textbooks have intensive reading texts and reading passages.

In order to make the two pieces of intensive reading material comparable, two published English textbooks specially edited for Chinese college students are presented.

Contemporary College English(CCE) (2004) VS. New College English(NCE) (2001)

(Both of them are published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing)

Briefly speaking, both of the two pieces of material present two texts with the similar difficulty which aims to Chinese college students in their first year. Besides, both of them provide vocabulary lists, reading comprehension (multiple choice) and post-reading questions and supply sufficient activities focusing on

vocabulary or grammar which have some relation to the original texts. Moreover, one or two pieces of extensive reading material are attached to the texts as I explain above. Concretely speaking, one reading passage is attached in *CCE (2004)* and two are in *NCE(2001)*.

Further, these two pieces of material which both focus on reading have some differences.

1) *CCE (2004)* provides a special part: “Notes to the Text” after the reading passage, in which, the editors give some explanation and grammatical analysis to the difficult sentences appearing in the text. The most important thing is that it gives some background information about the author and the text; the brief biography of the author; the social meaning of the texts; the original source of the texts etc. In such a way, the text itself is not an independent unit any more. Instead, it is contextualized. It helps the students through a top-down processing to understand the text in a social context or in a real world. To some extent, it gives room to developing pragmatic skills. In other words, it enables the text to be utterance rather than a group of sentences.

On this point, *NCE (2001)* doesn’t give any notes of the background about the text, but it provides some other activities –“listening” to introduce the main topic to be talked about in the text later. For example, the topic of the first unit is about “Love”. The listening activity ahead of the text is a song named *Love Story*, in which, students are required to listen to the song and fill in the blanks with the missing words. It is a very interesting activity. On one hand, the editors create a vivid context for the students. On the other hand, students get a chance to practice their listening. Meanwhile, they pay more attention and show more interests to the next part, the text. But the students are also asked to memorize the words and phrases before reading the text as the directions show. This assists the students better to understand the text by switching between top-down and bottom-up approaches.

2) Both of the two pieces of material are listed with some difficult phrases and expressions for the students’ better understanding. *CCE (2004)* gives the list without any explanation; while *NCE (2001)* does not only provide the list, but also supplies very detailed translation, explanation as well as sentence examples.

This point can be viewed from two opposing aspects. A detailed explanation is an easier and more convenient way for students to understand and memorize them. According to Hedge (2001, pp.193-194), however, “encouraging students to develop strategies for guessing word meanings from contextual clues and background knowledge” should be a good way to develop students’ discourse and pragmatic skills. Under this circumstance, *CCE(2004)* functions as such, but *NCE(2001)* seems to have done too much, which is not beneficial for students to do so.

In addition, both of the two pieces of material don’t give “any notice of discourse signals such as ‘moreover’, which signals addition, or ‘whereas’, which signals contrast. Or they may be words that organize discourse as ‘incident’, ‘event’, ‘episode’, ‘question’, ‘matter’” (Hedge, 2001, p.193). We may find some exercises focusing on this matter, but they are too vague, or said to be decontextualized without any support from the context: text. Therefore, if teachers use these books as the main resource, they would have to find their own methods to show the signals. In this way, however, the teaching effect and result could not be guaranteed considering the different teaching levels of different teachers.

In a word, there are some adaptations of these two materials. Both of them are coherent and well-set. They conform to the most of the criteria of good reading materials. With their notes, introduction and exercises, they create a good context for students to understand better, and they do, to some extent, develop students’ skills on pragmatics and discourse analysis. On this point, *CCE(2004)* seems to do a better job. However, if these two materials could be combined, and if more emphases could be put on discourse analysis concerning some key words and phrases which are crucial to build a contextualized and vivid context for students or guide teachers to explore a better way to develop students’ discourse skills, it would make a perfect material.

5. Conclusion

As it is accepted, reading teaching is very important and it has moved beyond the sentence level. It is believed that discourse and pragmatics are very important among the new methodology of reading. When it comes to a decision concerning which forms are better to be used in certain situations, discourse and pragmatics are the most important factors to be considered.

The main aim of this essay is to reflect on the ways in which discourse and pragmatics theories can be actually applied in language teaching. Through evaluation of the two pieces of material, we have got a better knowledge and more proper application of their theories so as to achieve effective teaching outcome.

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