

Discourse Analysis and Dialectic Procedures for Critical Reading Comprehension

R. Balamukunthan

Department of English, A.M. Jain College, Chennai, (Tamil Nadu) India

Abstract

This theoretical paper proposes that Discourse Analysis is an efficient procedure for teaching and learning a language. Teaching the learners to analyze the components of a target language is a sure way to enable them to acquire the language skills successfully. Writing is a very important skill in higher and professional education and officialdom. Reading is of equal importance because whatever is written must be read and understood. Therefore, the tertiary level learners have to become analytical of the functional system and values of writing and reading. Reading comprehension provides a combinative learning experience of reading and writing. It is necessary to brief how reading comprehension involves reading and writing. The learners keep reading a text until they comprehend it thoroughly so as to answer the questions for comprehension. They read the text, read the questions and exercises and read the text looking for answers to the comprehension questions. They express their comprehension in writing and read the answers they have produced. If they are not convinced of the correctness of the answers they read the text again. Thus, reading and writing become cyclically dynamic. Considering the dynamism of reading, the paper flatly refuses to believe the idea that reading is a passive skill. It strongly proposes that reading is an active skill which can be achieved by a set of teaching-learning strategies. To be precise, the paper holds that discourse analysis is an effective procedure for reading comprehension and reading is an active skill that can promote writing. The assumption that reading is a passive skill is an anti- cognitive and anti-pedagogic stand point.

Key Words:- Cognitive, combinative learning, comprehension, discourse analysis and passive skill

Introduction

Many applied linguists posit that the learners should be exposed to the discourse features and functions of a text. This exposure can develop the learner competence and performance in reading comprehension. Such enhancement of comprehension skill will be realized if only reading is treated as an active skill. Though this paper is a theoretical construct the proposed theories can be applied in planning and making the classroom delivery. They will be used in designing and administering the exercises for

comprehension. Thus, these theories can be grounded in the classroom practices of teaching-learning.

Explication of the key terms will be supportive in presenting the article clearly and logically. Discourse analysis is analyzing the language in use. This paper assumes that a text can be a talk or a conversation or a written presentation. The objective of discourse analysis is to examine how the language is used in the texts. The analysis becomes a procedure of transformation because it transforms a text into a discourse. A discourse becomes a

text if and when it is interpretively used for pedagogic purposes. Dialectic procedure is an aspect of discourse analysis. It involves establishing a connection with the text by using the procedures of conversation. This conversational strategy connects the readers and the text. The readers do not merely read the words and sentences. As they read the text they mentally raise questions and find answers. The questions and the answers are drawn from the text. This strategy enables the reader to realize how the text is made dynamically communicative. Critical comprehension involves the vital comprehension of a given text. It treats the assigned text as if it were a conversation in writing. Like the participants of a conversational event, the readers attempt to establish a communicative relationship with the writer. It is true that if the learners develop analytical and dialectic skills they will be able to transform a text into a discourse and comprehend it with ease and precision.

Description of Discourse

Discourse involves interactively reading a text for making its meaning. Conversation involves exchange of ideas and meanings. Hence, reading a text and participating in a conversation are to be considered. The readers interact with a text and interpret it mainly at the cognitive level. So, reading creates Unisource Discourse development. In a conversation, the participants make cognitive and contextual levels of interaction. The collaborative efforts of the participants produce a multi-source discourse development. Taking cues from these communicative features, this article proposes that the readers should read the text at the levels of cognition, context and concretion. Reading has to be a cognitive

and contextual strategy. It is this idea which makes Hesse to declare: "Rules of prosody and the rudiments of rhetoric, such as the method of direct statement, of proof, of ornament, of expansion, of transition are important for both the study of the authors and for composition" (Hesse 19, 1975). Thus, reading must be dialectic which is an active skill. "The labeling of reading and listening as "receptive" (as opposed to "productive") activities does not imply that L2 learners perform them passively and without effort. Learners must actively participate in creating meaning from L2 input, or else writing remains merely marks on paper and speech remains only a stream of noise that people emit through their mouth" (Saville-Troike 153, 2006)

Preface to Discourse Analysis

The term *Discourse Analysis* denotes the analysis of the interactional features of a verbal text or verbal communication in use. This analysis can be carried out with written texts or spoken texts in order to comprehend them. Naturally, it involves both the breaking up of a sentence into its basic components as well as analyzing the functional relationship among the sentences. Discourse analysis assumes that the meaning of a sentence cannot be precisely understood if the sentence is analyzed only in isolation. That is, a sentence should be analyzed in relation to other sentences, the context and the purpose of the writer. Thus, language must be studied in its contextual use. A text is a combination of sentences into a meaningful unit and discourse analysis is analyzing how the combination of sentences is done in accordance with the communicative context. Yule makes relevant observations here. He points out

that when we “ask how we make sense of what we read, how we can recognize well-constructed texts as opposed to those that are jumbled or incoherent, how we understand speakers who communicate more than they say and how we take part in the complex activity called conversation, we are undertaking what is known as discourse analysis” (Yule 141, 2010). Cutting proposes that pragmatics and discourse analysis are “approaches to studying language’s relation to the background features... [and] discourse analysis calls the quality of being meaningful and unified coherence” (1, 2002)

The knowledge of discourse is known as discourse competence and the ability to examine a discourse is termed discourse analysis. Discourse competence and discourse performance can facilitate the learners to comprehend a text and express the comprehension in writing. Discourse analysis is concerned with the functional use of language. It shows how the linguistic and communicative elements use the functional categories. It also helps the learners identify the differences between a sentence that makes a request and a sentence that raises a question. Reading comprehension requires the readers to develop insights into the way in the language is used functionally. The readers should be able to interpret what the writers intend to convey. The procedures of comprehension largely involve cognitive exchanges between the readers and the writer. Reading comprehension requires the readers to make themselves familiar with the mental model of the writer. The mental model of the readers must synchronize with the mental model of the writer. Whatever may be the function a

sentence every sentence makes a proposition. This proposition on the functional trait of sentences is true of even the phatic sentences such as greeting and blessing. These sentences are treated to be functional constructs rather than as mere linguistic constructs. It is universally true that blessings make the people happy and a curse does the opposite.

Discourse Competence of the Teachers

Linguistic competence and discourse competence are the mutual complements. Research in language teaching proves that linguistic competence amounts to nothing if the learners do not have discourse competence. Discourse competence can complement linguistic competence and can empower the learners to acquire advanced skills in reading and writing. In order to facilitate the discourse competence of the learners, the teachers have to develop their own competence first of all. Richards and Farrell stress on this need. They tell the teachers, “Other discourse skills will also need to be acquired- skills that enable you to manage classroom discourse so that it provides opportunities for language learning” (Richards and Farrell 16, 2011). These researchers hold that discourse skills relate to understanding and using the metalanguage and providing opportunities for students to develop and extend their linguistic resources (both grammatical and discursal) (ibid).

Discourse Analysis and Meaning Making

Discourse analysis is a dynamic procedure and any dynamic procedure will reveal new dimensions of meaning. Meaning is obtained as a result of a dynamic interactive force constructed by the reader. Discourse analysis relies on the contextual

and communicative interpretation of utterances rather than on a mere semantic notion attached with or evoked by the words within the sentence. Hesse reveals how an interpretation of a text is determined by the subject of the text. He asserts, "Knowledge is of two kinds- one of words, and the other of things. Whoever has no knowledge of things will not be helped by the knowledge of the words" (Hesse 31, 1975). The readers must think beyond what is obviously stated in the verbal expressions. The subject or idea of the text is important. Hesse admits this fact saying, "When a knowledge of the subject is wanting, then a knowledge of words is useless" (Hesse 32, 1975). Stern proves the interdependence of context, analysis and comprehension. He declares, "Language cannot be studied in isolation from the communicative intentions of language users and the context within which they use language" (Stern 133, 1983). He finds that discourse analysis is "a move in language teaching from isolated sentences to connected text passages, dialogues, descriptions, and narratives" (ibid). Meaning making is not a mere semantic exercise.

Text, Discourse and Reading Comprehension

For the purpose of teaching reading comprehension it is necessary to elaborate the distinction between text and discourse. A text is which is yet to be read and so is yet to be realized by the readers. As long as it is unread by a reader a text remains as a text. It is true that superficial reading does not interact with the text and allows the text to continue to be the text. When the text is read and realized it becomes a discourse. Thus, discourse indicates understanding and interpretation.

Discourse analysis includes the various analytical procedures that aim at understanding a text. Understanding a text is known as comprehension which implies learner familiarization with the meaning of the discourse at all levels. Thus, comprehension largely involves the procedures of converting a text into a discourse.

This conversion begins with reading and proceeds to writing. That is, the learners read and re-read the written text until they understand the relational meanings of the text cum discourse. Then, they are directed to express their understanding of the text in writing. The main problem with reading comprehension is that the text is treated only as a text and is not converted into a discourse. This failure is essentially a result of the adherence to the unproven belief that reading is a passive skill. A text will not divulge its meaning comprehensively or comprehensibly unless it is transformed into a discourse. The ways in which the learners attempt to mentally reconstruct the text into discourse form the nuclei of discourse analysis. The quantum of reading that goes into converting and comprehending proves that reading is a highly active skill. Though the writer is not physically present in the text, the readers have to visualize the writer's presence and treat him to be their fellow participant in a face-to-face communicative event. This proposition necessitates the inclusion of dialectic skills and dialectic reading in reading comprehension.

Dialectic

The transformation of a text into a discourse requires the art of dialectic too. Dialectic is the art of arguing for or against

an issue or a thing. The pleader takes a certain standpoint and expresses his arguments logically and convincingly. The objective of dialectic procedure may be to eliminate certain fallacies from the receiving point or to find a solution to a controversy between two men or groups. Generally, a dialectic event involves two individual participants or two groups of participants who assert and defend their views. While trying to prove their points with clever arguments they critically evaluate the truth and logic of the fellow participants. Though dialectic is made up of arguments it is often a cooperative procedure to arrive at a reasonable solution. The procedures of the communicative event are specifically determined and followed by the participants. The verbal claims of assertion, refusal, denial and acceptance of a dialectic event or text serve to defend or amend certain standpoints of the participants. Language teaching can make use of dialectic strategies for reading and writing too. The readers should strive to ascertain what the writer means to put forth. The objectives of the writer are very important for reading comprehension. Obviously, the ideas of the sentences are not embedded only in their words.

Dialectic Reading

Dialectic can be a key procedure for facilitating comprehension. The study proposes the concept of 'dialectic reading' to signify that the readers have to be as active, receptive and productive as the participants of a dialectic event. The readers may or may not accept the ideas of the writer. But, the dialectic procedures of reading can enhance the learners' powers of grasping the ideas of the writer. Such an enhancement of reading efficiency is a key

trait of critical reading which optimizes the precision of learner comprehension of the texts. The readers have to understand the meaning, intention, style and objectives of the writer. They can take hints from the context of the text. Dialectic procedures require the readers to become familiar with the features of rhetoric.

Rhetoric

Linguistically, the term rhetoric signifies persuading the listeners or the speakers. It is a part of the art of persuasion. It involves verbal and cognitive skills which can facilitate reading comprehension. That is, rhetorical skills can educate the readers to understand the writer's point of view, proposition, purpose and style which are known as the discourse techniques of writing. These elements determine the levels of learner comprehension. Considering the importance of rhetoric in language learning, the paper presents its traits briefly. The idea is that rhetoric can promote comprehension.

The rhetoricians identify the expressible verbal patterns which can communicatively link them with the target receivers. Rhetoric procedures include designing, constructing and using all verbal persuasions and persuasive symbols in such a way as to make the target audience accept the standpoint of the speaker or the writer. An expert rhetorician can persuade even mobs and crowds.

Rhetoric is eloquent, catchy and convincing. Hence, it becomes a key element of a target-specific discourse. Generally, it attempts to highlight the differences between two contrasting things. By exposing the differences, the rhetorical expressions promote the things or the ideas which they represent. Such

promotional exposures may be done by means of highlighting the positive aspects of the subject or by pointing out the negative aspects of its counterpart or by both the means. In the context of reading comprehension, the writers can be equated with rhetoricians. The writers and the rhetoricians often attempt to persuade the readers to accept their standpoint. An insight into the rhetorical traits of the writers or the speakers will be very useful for the readers or the listeners to understand the presentation or argument of the text. It is necessary to discuss classical rhetoric and contemporary rhetoric. Such a discussion will help the teachers and the learners to understand rhetoric better.

Classical Rhetoric

Researchers in linguistics talk of classical rhetoric and modern rhetoric. The nature of classical rhetoric is briefed first. Classically and traditionally rhetoric was a strategy of verbal inquisition to arrive at truth or gain victory for justice. It was a persuasive verbal strategy which the classical rhetoricians skillfully used in order to win their points. Those rhetoricians based their discourse on logic, probability, goodness, virtue and intelligence. Thus, they used rhetoric as a verbal and symbolic tool to make the listeners fall in with their arguments. They strove to achieve the attention of the audience by all the verbal measures. Though the objective of classical rhetoric was to establish truth occasionally it was used to construct falsehood. Yet, it was true that it more often served to establish truth than to promote its bipolar. That was why rhetoric was a subject of venerable study in those days.

Contemporary Rhetoric

In modern discourse, rhetoric largely involves ornamental verbiage which involves questions and statements that seek to build up or exploit the emotions of the audience in favour of the speaker or the writer. The subject of the rhetorical expressions may not have even an appreciable substance. Often, the term rhetoric has negative connotations thematically. It is true that it involves exaggeration, suppression of facts and enkindling the emotions of the audience with ulterior motive. However, the present study does not propose an examination on whether rhetoric constitutes truth or falsehood. From the perspectives of teaching reading comprehension, it proposes that rhetorical skill is a key one for the learners to acquire the skill of reading comprehension.

Rhetoric and the Theory of Communication

The theory of communication explores the content and structure of rhetoric and reveals that it is made up of proofs, assurances, syllogisms, questions, hunches and exclamations. The proofs which are claimed to be available elsewhere may not be available or presentable for an immediate scrutiny by the audience. However, the rhetoricians carefully select appropriate words, encode them in different patterns and successfully make them testimonies of their assertions. Simplicity, clarity, transparency, suggestiveness and readability are some of the key devices of rhetoric. Similes, metaphors and epithets are verbal devices that add artistic values to the stated propositions. Thus, rhetoric is a composition of excellent thinking and

eloquent expression. Rhetoric is a conceptual as well as practical strategy. No rhetorical expression can just be explained literally. The meaning of a rhetorical expression cannot be derived from its common linguistic features such as syntax and semantics. Interpretation of rhetoric requires rhetoric skills.

Summation

Reading is an active skill. The aim of reading is to understand a text. Understanding can be expressed in writing. Reading comprehension is tied up with writing as learner comprehension is tested through writing. In order to optimize

the efficiency of reading comprehension, the learners have to acquire discourse analytical, dialectic and rhetorical skills. Discourse analysis can expose the learners to the functional use of expressions in the texts. Dialectic procedures guide the learners to comprehend a text meticulously by using the question-answer technique. Rhetoric skills are useful in discerning the writer's point of view. This discernment can shed light for the readers to comprehend the text wholesomely. To be precise, discourse analysis, dialectic techniques and rhetorical skills can be effective in optimizing learner comprehension of written texts.

Works Cited:

- Cutting, Joan. *Pragmatics and Discourse- A Resource Book for Students*. Hong Kong: Routledge, 2002. Print
- Hesse, M.G. Ed. *Approaches to Teach Foreign Languages*. Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing, 1975. Print
- Levinson, Stephen. C. *Pragmatics*. Reprinted Cambridge. CUP, 2010. Print
- Richards, Jack. C., and Farrell, Thomas S.C. *Practice Teaching –A Reflective Approach*. Cambridge: C U P, 2011. Print
- Saville-Troike, Muriel. *Introducing Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: CUP, 2006. Print
- Stern, H.H. *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*. Oxford: O U P, 1983. Print
- Yule, George. *The Study of Language*. 4th edition. Cambridge: CUP, 2010. Print