

## Developing Discourse Competence through Reading Skills: a discourse analysis approach

By S.SAIGHI & Dr N.CHAOUKI  
University of Ouargla

### Abstract:

Formerly, language was looked at in isolation and the focus was on acquiring propositional and accuracy rules in the target language without considering the context in which it is embedded. A formal approach to language is not enough for FL learners to become members of the target discourse community. What is needed is a functional view of language that allows the learners to communicate socially. A discourse-based approach to language teaching is adopted which concentrates on meaning and communication. Its aim is to unlock the supra-sentential relationships. This approach aims at developing learners' discourse competence, a component accounting for describing the inter-sentential relationships that exist within a text. The present paper endeavors to develop learners' discourse competence through reading.

**Key words:** Discourse – discourse analysis- discourse competence- reading skills-suprasentential-communication.

### Introduction

The major aim of ELT is to enable learners to communicate effectively (Hedge, 2000). In order to achieve this goal, the language user needs to use the code appropriately (linguistically and socially). It is true that the grammar and the words that are encoded in the text are essential to comprehend it, yet they need to key into context to function pragmatically. So, people in the process of communication draw on the language knowledge embedded in shared contexts to enact discourse (Widdowson, 2003). Learning a second or foreign language entails developing discourse skills so as to function in a new target community (TC) contexts and in new interpersonal relations (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2005). Discourse is seen as the most appropriate framework within which these skills are best practised and developed.

### DISCOURSE

There is a plethora of definitions of discourse. The terms 'text' and 'discourse' are used. Nevertheless, Cook (1989) uses the two terms differently, defining 'text' as a stretch of language interpreted formally without context" (p.158), Whereas discourse refers to stretches of language perceived to be meaningful, unified, and purposive' (p.156). In a similar vein, Nunan (1993) states that 'text' refers only to the formal structures which make it as a unit of language, while 'discourse' is text in context (Nunan, 1993).

Further, the term 'discourse' has been approached from three perspectives: the formal approach, the functional approach, and the social approach (Schiffrin, 1994). Those who take the first route such as Fasold (1990) define it simply as language ultra the level of clause or sentence. This definition is deficient since there are words like the signs of the road which are comprehensible when they are put in an appropriate context. Those who take the second route define discourse as ' language in use' such as Brown & Yule (1983). This idea seems to

combine between the two previous approaches to have a holistic definition of 'discourse', that is defining discourse as a kind of social practice or the way language is used related to the way one constructs different identities and different social relationships (Schiffrin, 1994). Celce-Murcia & Olshtain (2000) define discourse as: "..... an instance of spoken or written language that has describable internal relationships of form and meaning (e.g., words, structures, cohesion) that relate coherently to an external communicative function or purpose and a given audience/ interlocutor" (p.4). The two notions of cohesion and coherence mentioned in the quotation are basic tenets in discourse analysis and hence in developing discourse competence.

### **Discourse Analysis**

The term 'discourse analysis' owes its origins to the linguist Zellig Harris (1952). He defines discourse analysis as " a method of seeking in any connected discrete linear material, whether language or language-alike, which contains more than one elementary sentence" (Harris, 1963, p.7). Later, Brown & Yule (1983) regards discourse analysis as " the study of language in use" (p.1). Cook (1989) contends that discourse analysis is the examination of "how stretches of language, considered in their full textual, social, and psychological context, become meaningful and unified for their users" (p.ix). In the same way, McCarthy (1991) views discourse analysis as the study of language in its socio-cultural context.

Discourse analysis emerged out of different works such as semiotics, sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, pragmatics, and so forth. It covers both written and spoken interactions. All the above definitions agree that discourse analysis is that melting pot in which form, meaning, and context are in interaction.

Recently, many linguists suggest a discourse-based approach to teaching and learning English as Foreign Language (EFL) (Cook, 1989; McCarthy, 1991; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). They highlighted the significance of context and admitted that it is true that discourse analysis cannot be isolated from the study of grammar and phonology, yet it is more interested in what people do with language; i.e. speech acts and on how people react towards them. Whether in its spoken or written form; people use language to perform a particular function. In order to produce or interpret a particular meaning, one needs linguistic forms, functions, and the context in which discourse is embedded.

### **DISCOURSE**

The term 'communicative competence' (CC) was firstly coined by Hymes (1972) who criticized Chomsky's linguistic competence as being inadequate and idealized. The concept of CC integrates both knowledge of language and how this knowledge is used appropriately in context (Widdowson, 2003). It comprises grammatical competence, sociocultural competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence (Canale, 1983). Discourse competence is the core competence among the aforementioned since "it is in and through discourse that all other competencies are realized. And it is in discourse and through discourse that the manifestation of the other competencies can best be observed, researched, and assessed." (Celce- Murcia & Olshtain, 2000, p.16). Brown (2000) considered discourse competence as "the ability we have to connect sentences in stretches of discourse and to form a meaningful whole out of a series of utterances" (p. 247). Uso-Juan & Martinez- Flor (2006) argue that "Discourse competence implies an understanding of how language operates at a

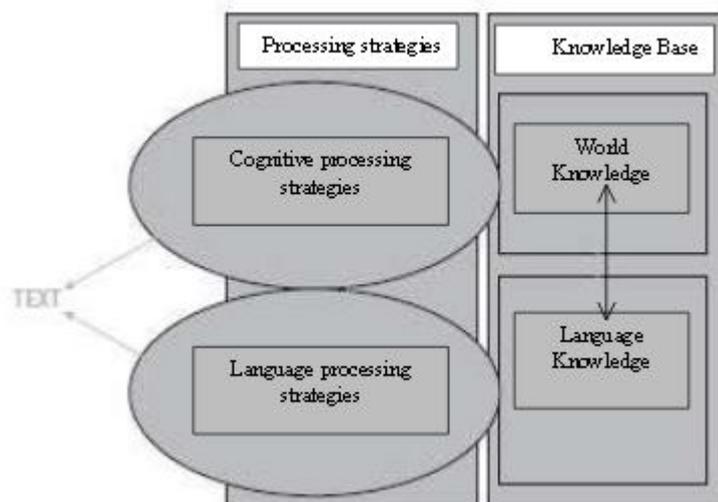
level above the sentence" (p.37). "It involves the knowledge of written discourse features such as markers, cohesion and coherence as well as formal schemata (i.e., knowledge of how different discourse types are organized) with reference to the particular communicative goal and context"(ibid, p.268). Applying this definition to the context of reading, if students want to comprehend a particular text, they need to know the discourse markers which signal the intra-sentential and the inter-sentential relationships and relate them to the whole context and the communicative goal of a particular text. Celce-Murcia& Olshtain (2005) sees discourse competence as "an integrated ability that one needs in order to make use of one's sociocultural and linguistic competence to select or interpret words, phrases and sentence structures that produce coherent and cohesive segments of language that appropriately communicate an intended meaning to specific audience" (p.731)

### READING SKILLS

Reading skill performs a crucial role in facilitating the acquisition of communicative competence (Uso-Juan and Martinez-Flor, 2006). It is one of the four skills that help to develop learners' discourse competence.

Uso-Juan (2006) in (Uso-Juan and Martinez-Flor, 2006) contends that: "Reading is now seen as an interactive, constructive and contextualized process through which individuals make meaning "(p.271). This interactivity mentioned in the above definition has numerous interpretations. First, they may mean by the word ' interactive ' the way the reader and the writer interact with each other to arrive to the intended meaning or to reconstruct meaning that accords with the perception of the reader since the text has many interpretations and what the reader understands from the text varies not only between one reader and another who have different purposes but also in the same person if s/he approaches the text at different times or for different purposes (Alderson, 2000). The reader reconstructs meaning through gathering the different pieces of a given text like a jigsaw by comparing information in the text to his/her background knowledge and prior experience. The reader does not come to the text empty handed. S/he has background knowledge on the topic or previous experience in dealing with similar texts (intertextuality).

In the present study, Birch (2007) hypothetical model is adopted. As it is shown in figure 1 below, the model is composed of two components, namely the knowledge base and the strategies used to process the text. The former consists of language knowledge and world knowledge. Language knowledge refers to one's conscious or unconscious knowledge of parts of speech: verbs, adjectives... While Knowledge of the world refers to our knowledge of the surrounding, people (participants), events ... Without such knowledge, it would be difficult to process any language. The latter consists of language processing strategies and cognitive processing strategies. Language processing strategies contain letter recognition, words identification ... Cognitive processing strategies contain inference, predicting, problem-solving, ... Knowledge of the world and cognitive strategies cannot be accessed if the lower level skills are not learned. Therefore, the reader may proceed top-down wards or bottom-up wards to comprehend the text.



**Figure 1. Birch( 2007) hypothetical model of the reading process adapted from Lems ,Miller, and Soro, 2010,p.25**

## DEVELOPING DISCOURSE COMPETENCE

In order to develop discourse competence, all elements should be combined in designing reading courses. These reading courses should be designed on the basis of the approach adopted viz discourse analysis. The chosen methodology, materials, activities, tasks, and assessment are all discourse-based.

Methodologically speaking, the reading course is divided into: Pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading. First, Pre- reading activities are a kind of warming –up or brainstorming in which the teacher tries to activate the students' relevant schematic knowledge to have a general idea about the text and encourage learners to predict how the new information fits with their prior knowledge (Grabe& Stoller, 2001). This is accomplished by letting students think, take notes, and discuss everything related to the topic by employing some techniques like prediction, semantic mapping, etc. This is done by scanning the text for headings/sub-headings, diagrams, charts, and trying to identify the genre of the text to enable students to predict the topic. Second, While-reading phase is where the teacher monitors the interaction that happens between students as s readers and the text. During this phase, learners can take notes to compile new vocabulary, new information, and more importantly to record their reaction to the text. In addition, they can answer questions raised during the pre-reading phase or write down predictions of what will come next .The last phase is post-reading. This stage allows the teachers to evaluate the appropriateness of students' interpretation of the text. The teacher can give students another text about the same subject to read. By the same token, learners will be more and more autonomous. At this phase, teachers can give learners other tasks such as scrambled paragraph and ask them to re-order it, or s/he can provide them with the beginning of paragraph and ask them to complete it. In this way, they provide for the necessary cohesive devices and make the text coherent.

When teachers design a reading course, they should choose authentic materials that meet their students' needs and diversify genres: newspapers, articles, stories... in order to allow learners to identify a variety of structures and communicative purposes. In addition, activities should be chosen to the extent that they develop the two notions of cohesion and

coherence. Further, the mode of assessment should be discourse-based. It should have the same basis, ranging from formal to functional and contextual components. If the aforementioned ingredients are put together, learners' discourse competence will be developed.

## CONCLUSION

For the enactment of discourse, one needs more than the formal aspects of language. The social and cultural context in which discourse is embedded are needed. To develop learners' discourse competence, the three components should be drawn upon: the formal, the functional and the contextual.

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