

An approach to Teaching Grammar through Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The general thrust of the present article is to investigate the effects of raising students' discursal awareness in their learning of grammar. It is argued that teaching grammar through discourse analysis is expected to promote learners' cognitive and contextual involvement in the learning process. The two areas of discourse analysis, cohesion and coherence, are attended to as two main requirements in building up learners' discourse competence. The key point in this methodology is to have students engage interactively in communicative activities and scenarios likely to raise their grammatical awareness without there being a focus on grammatical items as an end in themselves. Rather, students will be taught how these items are employed to develop discourse competence.

Key words: Discourse, grammar, grammatical competence, bottom-up processing, top-down processing, propositional and illocutionary meanings.

INTRODUCTION

It appears that if teaching aims at enabling students, as users of the language, to discover the ways in which language is used in real communication, grammar pedagogy should cease to be looked solely at from a formal viewpoint. Rather, attention should be shifted to understanding how grammatical items (words and sentences) combine to generate meaningful discourse and how grammatical options are employed to achieve various meanings of utterances. It seems clear that high level of grammatical competence is not sufficient for students to recognize and produce socially and contextually appropriate language. The trend has turned towards a methodology that is consistent with the use of more differentiated spectrum of discourse lubricants and strategies.

A METHODOLOGY FOR TEACHING

In order to apply the methodological construct, two procedures, bottom-up¹ and top-down² are adopted. The former (bottom-up processing) consists in instructing students to account for the way (s) formal items – words and meanings – are packaged in the sentence. This involves a consideration of propositional meaning of the sentence (Widdowson, 1978, 1979, Nunan 1993, Celce-Murcia & Olshtain 2000), that of its different constituents (words and their meanings) and that of their

combinations in the construction of the whole sentence. Next to be attended to is how sentences combine to form larger stretches of language. Then, and at a later stage, a consideration of how these formal units (words and sentences) come to be understood as utterances is to follow. At this same stage, conditions accompanying given utterances and granting them particular interpretation will be accounted for. The latter type (top-down processing) consists in starting from the context where the piece of discourse is being embedded and then proceeding downwards towards the sentence and items within the sentence.

BOTTOM-UP PROCESSING

This is one of the two ways of processing that students will be guided to follow in interpreting a given piece of discourse. In one way, they will work out meanings of words and structures to construct the sentence meaning and proceed upward to process and comprehend discourse meaning (bottom-up processing). In another way, they will work out such meanings on the basis of contextual clues (Brown & Yule 1983).

Students will be given a set of sentences about a given topic and are asked to do the accompanying tasks. A priming stage is of necessity each time students do a particular task. This consists usually in activating some relevant background knowledge or past experience. This is usually done orally, and a written activity is not excluded. Teachers are entitled to choose what they judge workable in this connection. Some eliciting questions about the topic could serve a pre-task activity. This phase seems to pave the way to the core of the task.

First, students are given enough time to read the text at least three times and are led gradually to attend to items (words) in each sentence and go on probing into their respective forms and meanings. Then, they are guided, by the teacher, to see to how these units (elements in the clause) combine with one another according to their form and meaning requirements within each sentence. Then, it is to be pointed out that each word in the sentences comes to combine with others in a way that sounds correct from the point of view of accuracy (grammatical correctness).

In order to check on students' awareness of the formal points, the teacher can proceed to getting feedback from students by devising a written activity asking them to produce stretches of sentences similar to those accounted for and divide them into their formal components. Any contextual hints from students should be encouraged by the teacher. The same procedure can be done orally if the teacher judges it feasible.

Once students are judged to be aware of such formal insights, what remains to be done is to finish helping them build up the formal picture of the form of sentences, i.e. the semantic side. All the words are loaded, each with a dictionary meaning that sets them apart from each other as individual entities. Yet, their being together in one sentence makes them hold particular semantic relationships with one another. Thus, meanings of the words in any sentence co-occur with each other in a way that helps weave the whole meaning of the sentence.

The second stage up is to attend to how each of the above sentences combines and develops 'co-operatively' with others to build another higher 'block', viz.

discourse. On a first level, and without losing sight of the above intra-sentential insights, students are asked to trace how sentences link to each other through the whole segment by spotting formal signposts.

Prima facie, students will be led to discover that the same sentential form, say, the imperative, is being used throughout the whole sentences. What is more, the formal meanings of words across sentences are such that they allow for a particular kind of development for the sake of achieving cohesion. There exists among sentences an outer linking which is supposed to carry the meaning of one sentence to another. Students will have the opportunity to attempt at arranging sentences in various ways provided that this should not affect discourse meaning.

TOP-DOWN PROCESSING

This second procedure operates in the opposite direction from bottom-up processing. Students, here, are rather set to a contextual enquiry, bringing about those non-linguistic clues that are likely to help situate first the communicative event in question through a process of interpretation check whereby they – as language users – elaborate meanings so that they become explicit (Widdowson 1979, 1983).

Instead of decoding every element (word, sentence, etc.), students go about forming hypotheses about situating the text at hand in its appropriate setting. In what follows, we will deal with the first segment only. The same will be applicable to the second one.

So, first, students will be asked to explore the main topic the segment is about. This can be done by activating some background knowledge and making situational connections to stimulate students' predictions as to the topic. Students' past experience is to be drawn upon here. These two strategies will enable them to form a reading purpose for the text they have to handle. A process of text exploration is followed whereby students are asked to set the piece of discourse at hand in its appropriate context. In such a process of actively building the world of the text, the role of students is to match what they bring to the text (past knowledge) with what the writer puts into it (their expectations).

After a reading phase which consists in allowing students to get the gist of the text by skimming it to have a broad understanding, then comes the phase of hypothesis testing whereby students test what they know with what they expect the producer of the text to tell them. They most probably confirm their hypotheses or reject them and formulate others and so on. The process will continue until an appropriate match is achieved between what students (as readers) bring to the text and the writer's purpose in the text.

Obviously, students' responses vary according to their background knowledge and conventions of language use, and their interests, attitudes and expectations as receivers of a given message. This lead-in phase will spark off both interpreting and inferring processes; the two processes that are inherent in any discursual undertaking.

Along the process, learners are made aware of the communicative potential of the linguistic elements constituting the piece of discourse under scrutiny by attributing

'particular value to linguistic elements as they are conditioned by the context and the situation in which they occur' (Widdowson: 1979). Further, students are led to proceed to setting the social and the spacio-temporal scene of the communicative event. Some questions as to *who* is communicating with *whom*, *where*, *when* and *why* would serve this purpose. Students' awareness of these contextual clues should be brought gradually to its maximum to cope with the situation appropriately.

So, once coping with the contextual demands of the communicative event, students will see themselves more involved in exploring the depths of the communicative event.

Next to be accounted for is the communicative mood of the whole discourse. That is, the illocutionary pattern the segments above revolve around. This is the act-exploration stage. Before getting students to parse acts into isolated functions, it would be a much rewarding strategy to let them look at the piece of discourse, as one coherent piece of discourse, serving a communicative purpose. Such a discourse requirement will lead to another stage: that of students' exploring the relationships among various illocutionary acts.

These acts, realized by means of a declarative clause, are meant by the addresser to be less prominent than their counterparts realized by the imperative form. This is due to the fact that language users do not assign the same communicative role to acts in a given piece of communication; hence different acts may have different statuses. Structurally, acts can either be expressed by using 'dependent' or 'independent' clauses.

Through this second procedure (Top-down processing), students deal with coherence. Covert illocutionary relationships are attended to, providing for the second facet of discourse i.e. coherence, the first being cohesion.

MATERIALS

Materials are selected mainly for general purposes, yet they can just the same be used for special language purposes. What is more, materials selection was made on the basis of their being appropriate for the students' level. However, a certain amount of simplification was made depending on the type and level of activities and tasks. Materials are, then, more contexts for the creation of discourse than *acts of texts or language presentation* (Prabhu 1987). They become, thus, those actual *discourse events* that are available to learners in the classroom, and whose potential is to be projected outside. In order to achieve what the model aims at, teaching materials comprise those segments of discourse that revolve around themes of interest and where students are called upon to do the activity and learn something from it. These themes have been selected on the basis of their usefulness to students and the amount of complexity that an upper intermediate learner can cope with. Techniques have been chosen to the extent that they contribute to the learning/teaching objectives stated earlier. Such techniques as 'paraphrasing', 'discourse recasting', 'formal and functional transformations', 'exploring contextual features', are but some procedures that serve the implementation of the suggested teaching model.

CONCLUSION

If grammar instruction is to be effective for the enhancement of students' language awareness and their communicative competence, it must be presented to them at a discourse level, whereby both cohesion and coherence are accounted for. An approach is suggested which is likely to promote both knowing the grammar of the language and doing things with it within the framework of discourse. To achieve this, students are considered as active participants who are fully involved in the elaboration of meaning through two models of discourse processing. It appears that two-way processing is liable to raise students' awareness as to using language. They will thereby explore and make choices among different meanings conveyed by various forms to cope with the intended meaning.

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