Comprehending Written Discourse in an EFL Classroom
استيعاب الخطاب الكتابي في فصل دراسي للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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Abstract:

The purpose of the present study is to shed light on the concepts and elements involved in written discourse comprehension   on the part of EFL learners. The question that should be raised is the following: what are the elements involved in the process of written discourse comprehension? The review of literature reveals that the concepts of cohesion, coherence, context, prior knowledge, and pragmatics are the building blocks of this process. Besides the linguistic knowledge, EFL readers have to take advantage of discourse knowledge as well. Comprehending written discourse implies that readers recognise the message being transmitted by using their pragmatic knowledge. They also need, in fact, to know the intended readership.

Key words:. written discourse, shared knowledge, comprehension, cohesion, coherence, context, pragmatics, prior knowledge.

ملخص:

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى القاء الضوء على العناصر التي تدخل في فهم الخطاب المكتوب من طرف متعلمي اللغة الانجليزية. السؤال المطروح هو: ما هي العناصر التي تدخل في فهم الخطاب المكتوب؟ التناص، التناسق، السياق، المعرفة المسبقة والتداولية يشكلون أساس عملية فهم الخطاب المكتوب، على متعلمي الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية أن يأخذوا بعين الاعتبار معرفة الخطاب عند قراءة الخطاب المكتوب، بالاضافة الى المعرفة اللغوية، فهم الخطاب المكتوب من طرف الطلاب يتطلب استخراج الرسالة المرسلة من الكاتب باستعمال المعرفة التداولية، ولبلوغ هذا الهدف، على الطلاب أيضا معرفة الفئة المستهدفة من القراء.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الخطاب المكتوب، المعرفة المشتركة، التناص، التناسق، الفهم، السياق، المعرفة المسبقة، التداولية.

Introduction

For many scholars in the twentieth century, the competent users of language were the ones who performed well-formed sentences; that is, the ones who use correct grammar (El Kouti & Goui, 2018). Grammar was given priority over many other aspects of language. However, this orientation did not last for a long time, for second and foreign language learners did not produce connected, contextualised sentences although they acquired linguistic competence (ibid). For Olshtain and Celce-Murcia, '*Generations of learners practiced sentences in the target language and remained quite incapable of linking these sentences into meaningful stretches of discourse*' (2001, p. 708). This truth made researchers in the field of language teaching ask many questions about how L2/FL learners produce contextualised sentences (El Kouti & Goui, ibid). Researchers began to concentrate on other elements that assist in using language appropriately. To this reason, the

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communicative approach drew attention to the focus on discourse as the basic unit of analysis rather than the sentence. This new orientation took into consideration the context in which pieces of discourse take place and the communicative functions that were added have been incorporated in the teaching programme.

The communicative approach has led to a great interest in analysing discourse language on the part of teachers and researchers. The latter became more convinced that using language for communication in a specific context entails producing and comprehending discourse. The question that should be raised is the following: to what extent is discourse analysis relevant to comprehending a piece of writing?

2 .Literature Review

2.1.The Contribution of Discourse Analysis to Writing

Applied linguists, in the second half of the twentieth century, shifted their attention towards discourse (text) as the basic unit of analysis rather than the sentence (ElKouti, 2017b). This new trend required the production of meaningful pieces of discourse. Cook (2003) considers discourse analysis as *"crucial to applied linguistic analysis in areas involving the development or assessment of language proficiency… and successful communication"* (p. 52). The communicative approach, in fact, has implemented discourse as an important framework. The traditional way of language teaching was criticised by Widdowson (1979). He stated that:

> language teachers have tended to take their cue from the grammarian and have concentrated on the teaching of sentences as self-contained units…this assumption is of very doubtful validity indeed. It has been found…that students entering higher education with the experience of six or more years of instruction in English at the secondary, have considerable difficulty coping with language in its normal communicative use…, a knowledge of how the language functions in communication does not automatically follow from a knowledge of sentences. This role for English requires a new orientation to its teaching…What this orientation amounts to is a change of focus from the sentence as the basic unit in language teaching to the use of sentences in combination (p. 87-88).

Within any specified language activity, a focus has been on various discourse features. In fact, discourse analysis facilitates meaning negotiation and language processing easier, and prior knowledge is involved in any type of discourse (El Kouti & Goui, 2018). The combination of both schematic and systemic knowledge on the part of learners ensures effective communication, and this can only be fulfilled when learners are aware of the socio-cultural dimension of the target language. In this way, learners will be enabled to understand themselves linguistically when they encounter native speakers of that language. In the literature, this is called the *communicative competence* which is the paramount objective for language teachers. Widdowson (1978) also stressed the

importance of materials in contributing to the transfer from grammatical competence to the communicative competence. He states:

Once we accept the need to teach language as communication, we can obviously no longer think of language in terms only of sentences. We must consider the nature of discourse, and how best to teach it. Language teaching materials have in the past been largely derived from the products of theoretical sentence grammars. We now need materials which derive from a description of discourse; materials which will effect the transfer from grammatical competence, a knowledge of sentences, to what has been called communicative competence (p.88).

Teaching language through the communicative approach is accompanied by discourse analysis through the creation suitable contexts for interaction, illustration of speaker/hearer and reader/writer exchanges, and the variety of situations within which learners process language (El Kouti, 2017). It seems that the focus has shifted towards sociolinguistic features as they occur in any natural interaction. These features have been incorporated into language materials and classroom activities. There was also a focus on the participants in any communicative event; that is, age, social status, and other personal characteristics of the interactants are taken into consideration if real-life interactions are represented in the classroom. This process draws the learners' attention towards the linguistic choices for those features.

2. 2.Shared Knowledge

A discourse perspective to language teaching takes into consideration the notion of *shared knowledge* (El Kouti & Goui, 2018). Shared knowledge refers to one's general knowledge of the world. It includes the general knowledge of the world and the socio-cultural knowledge that is connected to the target speech community whose language the learner is aiming to acquire. A body of research has shown that the world knowledge affects the communicative interaction by either making it easy or difficult.

While processing a text, readers rely on their prior knowledge. The latter is considered as the conceptual knowledge that allows both the writer and the reader to communicate via the written text (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2001). Prior knowledge refers to the knowledge that a learner knows: persons, events, etc. This knowledge makes a conceptual framework that helps the learner interact with the world (Marr & Gormley, 1982; Schallert, 1982 in ibid; Widdowson, 2007). This framework includes discipline and domain knowledge besides knowledge of syntax, rhetoric and text structure (ibid).

Shared knowledge between readers and writers consists of writing conventions, familiarity with types of genre and rhetorical traditions (ibid). Since students may come from different backgrounds, language curricula planning should consider the cross-cultural differences and the factor of age.

Shared knowledge should be implemented in modern language pedagogy. Any discourse-based model should concentrate on both linguistic and content knowledge and context and discourse

knowledge. Effective communication implies these types of knowledge besides other elements. Teachers are invited to draw their students' attention to those types of knowledge.

3.2 .Form and Function

Researchers agree that readers should understand written discourse both propositionally and illocutionary; that is, they should combine both form and function in an interactive way. More explicitly, readers should be aware of the formal and functional aspect of a piece of written discourse. In his lectures entitled '*How to do Things with Words*', Austin (1962) stated that words are produced to do things, i.e. to fulfill some functions. According to the literature, using language concentrated at the beginning on form. Then, the focus shifted to function. Later, there has been another shift towards the interpretation of grammatical forms relying on linguistic or situational factors (McCarthy, 1991). Since the focus of this article is on writing, then, it is advisable to have a look at the factors that facilitate the comprehension of written discourse.

3.Written Discourse Comprehension

Comprehension is the goal behind reading in academic settings, in the majority of cases, which makes the reader go through the process of interpreting the written language (El Kouti & Goui, ibid). Since the text is the mediator between the author and the reader, the reader is going to utilise his/her discourse knowledge to comprehend and interpret the written discourse and get the implied message.

3.1. Written Discourse

Despite the fact that language, written or spoken, fulfills a number of functions, Halliday (1985b) argues that written language is different from spoken language. While spoken text includes utterances which may be incomplete, written text includes complete well-formed sentences. This reflects the amount of time spent in the written text production. Duke and Carlisle (2011, p. 201) claim that written texts "*mark sentences and paragraphs, use paralinguistic cues such as italicization, and provide other forms of visual representation of ideas and information (e.g., pictures, graphs)*". This process does not allow immediate interaction with the author, which delays the interpretation and comprehension of written text on the part of the reader. As opposed to spoken discourse, writers and readers of written discourse interact in a different way, and writers design their discourse for their intended readers (Schiffrin, 2006). So, in writing, as Hinkel (2005) claims, discourse analysis provides explanation of text's global features and ideas' organisation.

For processing a written text, readers should do some tasks. The latter are: decoding the text by identifying the written signs; interpreting the text through the combination of the meaning of groups of words and; finally, detecting the intended message of the author. There are at least three participants in the interactive reading approach: the author, the text, and the reader, and during reading, the reader utilises the knowledge that he/she brings to the text besides the textual information. In sum, negotiation of meaning requires both schematic knowledge and systemic knowledge (Hedge, 2000; Widdowson, 2007).

.3.2 .The Building Blocks of Written Discourse Comprehension:

Cohesion, coherence, context, background knowledge, and pragmatics all contribute to the comprehension of written discourse, as mentioned above. The following will deal with all those elements explicitly.

3.2.1. Cohesion

Cohesion is a number of surface-level signals that help readers in linking ideas in a text. It shows how discourse is organised in a text and the writer's intention (Grabe, 2009; Johnstone, 2002; Nunan, 1993; Nuttall, 1996; Yule, 1996). Widdowson (1978) defines cohesion as '*the overt, linguistically-signalled relationship between propositions*' (p. 31). This overt feature ensures surface evidence for the unity and connectedness of a text (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). Cohesion is reflected in the grammatical and lexical devices that make part of language. Readers not acquiring these devices will encounter difficulties in comprehending texts (ibid). Widdowson (2007) argues that:

> These cohesive devices, then, serve to link parts of a text together. It is important
> to note, however, that they (i.e. link parts of the texts together) so that new
> content is understood in relation to the context that has been established in the
> reader's mind by what has been said before. That is to say, the text design has a
> discourse function-it is designed to key into context so as to express the message
> the producer has in mind p. 47).

A number of researchers stressed the importance of cohesion. Yule (1996), for example, claims that cohesive devices assist the identification of the discourse organization and structure of a text on the part of readers, which facilitates text comprehension. He states that "*Analysis of...cohesive links within a text gives us some insight into how writers structure what they want to say, and may be crucial factors in our judgments on whether something is well-written or not* (p. 141). He also stresses the difference of the conventions of cohesive structure across languages, which makes texts translation difficult. In her turn, Hatch (1992) argues that cohesive links make a piece of written discourse more explicit.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) mention five types of cohesion: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. As a matter of fact, Halliday and Hasan's (ibid) was the first work that investigated cohesion in an explicit manner. For the authors, it is part of language. They point out that '*The concept of cohesion is a semantic one; it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text.*' (ibid, p. 4). Therefore, for them, the feature that gives a quality of text is cohesion. Teachers are invited to teach their students these cohesive devices by

providing them with texts including examples of these. Nevertheless, a text should be coherent as well.

➢ Reference

The writer, in written discourse, uses some linguistic devices so as to allow readers to comprehend any piece of discourse. Reference is one of the cohesive devices. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), it refers to "the specific nature of the information that is signaled for retrieval" (p.31). For Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000),

> Reference needs to be maintained throughout a written message of any sort in order to ensure both cohesion and coherence. The reader relies on grammatical features that provide indications of reference such as the pronoun system, the article system, or demonstratives (p. 130).

Here is an example:

"The bank continues to develop and expand **its** international operations…" (Corbett, 1990). It is clear that **its** refers to "The bank". This is called personal reference.

➢ Substitution

Substitution is a grammatical relation of wording not of meaning (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). The items that are considered as substitutes are: "one/ones/same", "do", and "so, not" which means that substitution can be nominal, verbal or clausal. As a remark, the majority of discourse analysis references focus more on providing examples of spoken discourse than of written discourse. For example,

1. I've bought new shoes. These **ones** have become old. → **nominal**
2. A: I always read poems.
   B: So **do** I. → **verbal**

3. A: It's going to be windy.
   B: I think **so**. → **clausal**

➢ Ellipsis

According to McCarthy (1991), ellipsis refers to the omission of grammatical elements assumed obvious from the context. Nunan (1993) argued that "ellipsis occurs when some essential structural element is omitted from a sentence or clause and can only be recovered by referring to an element in the preceding text" (p. 25). Halliday and Hasan (ibid) called ellipsis as "substitution by zero" (p. 142). Ellipsis can be nominal, verbal or clausal as follows:

1. Maths and physics are subjects. Both (0) are important. → **nominal**
2. Though the United States held less than 5 percent of the world's population, it accounted for more than 25 percent of the world's economic output. Japan, the world's second largest economy, produced about half (0) as much.
   (Adapted from "Outline of the U.S. Economy" by Conte and Carr with permission from the U.S. Department of State)

3. Some banks in Algeria use interests whereas post-offices do not (0). →**verbal**

➢ Conjunctions (Discourse Markers)

Nunan (1993) stated that a conjunction is not a device for reminding the reader of previously mentioned entities but a cohesive device. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), cohesive devices which tie a text together are the following:

- adversative: but, however, on the other hand, nevertheless…
- additive: and, or, furthermore, moreover, in addition…
- temporal: first, then, after that … (relationships in terms of the timing of their occurrence).
- causal: so, consequently, because, for … (relationship of cause and consequence).

In fact, cohesive devices make the relationship in the text explicit. According to the literature, they are also called discourse markers.

From the reader's viewpoint, discourse markers are of three types:

1. Markers which signal the sequence in which reported events occurred.
2. Markers which signal the writer's manner of organizing the discourse.
3. Markers which indicate the writer's view of the facts, etc written about.

(Nuttall, 1996, p. 94)

Nuttall (ibid) classified these markers, depending on their function, as follows:

- Sequencing: first of all, next, at this point, in conclusion, etc
- Re-expressing: that is to say, or rather, to put it another, ie, etc
- Specifying: namely, that is to say, viz, to wit, etc
- Referring: in this respect, in that connection, as we said, apart from this, etc
- Resuming: to resume, to return to the previous point, getting back to the argument, etc
- Exemplifying: to illustrate this, thus, for example, eg, etc
- Summarizing: to sum up, in short, to recapitulate, etc
- Focusing: let us consider, we must now turn to, I shall begin by, etc

(p. 95)

➢ Lexical Cohesion

Sometimes two words are found semantically related in some way. In actuality, there are two categories: reiteration and collocation. From a discourse perspective, collocation consists of all the semantically related items, and this can cause major problems (McCarthy, 1991; Nunan, 1993).

For McCarthy (ibid), collocation refers to

> the probability that lexical items will co-occur, and is not a semantic relation between words…we shall consider the term 'lexical cohesion' to mean only exact repetition of words in creating *textuality*, that property of text which distinguishes it from a random sequence of unconnected sentences. We shall consequently ignore collocational associations across sentence boundaries as lying outside of these semantic relations (p. 65).

Reiteration is "either restating an item in a later part of the discourse by direct repetition or else reasserting its meaning by exploiting lexical relations" (McCarthy, ibid). It includes repetition, synonym, near synonym, hyponymy, superordinate, and general word.

Though lexical collocation causes a problem, as it includes an open class of items, it is very important in text coherence. Lexical cohesion is the most interesting cohesive device.

Despite the fact that cohesive devices that include lexical cohesion are very crucial in connecting ideas in texts, they are still not sufficient for comprehending those texts as Yule (1996a) pointed out:

> However, by itself, cohesion would not be sufficient to enable us to make sense of what we read. It is quite easy to create a highly cohesive text which has a lot of connections between the sentences, but which remains difficult to interpret (p. 141).

In practice, foreign language readers face some reading problems when trying to comprehend and interpret lexical items and other parts of written discourse. This is a result of the use of different lexical items that refer to the same thing.

3.2.2. Coherence

As mentioned above, for Halliday and Hasan (1976), a piece of writing is considered as meaningful only when it includes cohesive devices. However, for some researchers such as Carrell (1982) and others view cohesion as assisting a discourse to be coherent. Widdowson (2007) states:

> Cohesive devices are only aids to understanding and can only be effective to the extent that they enable readers (or listeners) to construct meaning that makes contextual sense to them, in other words to the extent that the cohesion in the text enables them to derive a coherent discourse from it (p. 49).

In this case, cohesion is an aspect of coherence. Widdowson (ibid) also points out that sometimes even if a text is cohesive, it can lack coherence as follows:

> The process may seem complicated but actually it is not really, so long as you prepare things in advance and know what has to be done in what order. Some of the things you need you may already have, but others, of course, you may need to get. They are not always readily available and when they are they can be quite expensive. But the final result will make all the effort and cost worthwhile (ibid, p. 50).

Although the above piece of writing is cohesive, viz., including co-textual connections, it is not meaningful. Coherent written discourse is related to the extent to which '*it can be related externally to contextual realities, to ideational and interpersonal schemata that readers are familiar with in the particular socio-cultural world they live in*' (ibid, p.51). Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) explain:

Coherence contributes to the unity of a piece of discourse such that the individual sentences or utterances hang together and relate to each other. This unity and relatedness is partially a result of a recognizable organizational pattern for the propositions and ideas in the passage, but it also depends of linguistic devices that strengthen global unity and create local connectedness (p. 8).

Readers may not comprehend a text if they lack the schematic frame of reference of a text. In actuality, whenever this frame is provided, they can make mental representation of a text easily. In other words, coherent written discourse involves both types of processes; that is, bottom-up and top-down.

A piece of written discourse may include no cohesive ties, but it is coherent. Nuttall (1996) demonstrates this through the following example:

> *Suddenly from the dark road ahead came a terrible screaming. Gerard's hand tightened on his dagger.* (p. 25)

In order for a piece of written discourse to be comprehended, it should be cohesive and coherent. The first one means that there are textual connections between sentences whereas the second one ensures the logical connection between ideas. Nunan (1993) confirmss that *"cohesion is neither necessary nor sufficient for the creation of coherent discourse"* (p. 61). Nevertheless, written discourse must be both cohesive and coherent, which leads to say that cohesion is just an aspect of coherence.

3.2.3. Context

In written communication, context is what is assumed to be relevant though situational factors may not be relevant at all. This is because the place and the time of reading a text differ from the place and the time of its production (Widdowson, 2007). Despite this fact, there should be a '*common context of shared knowledge*' (p. 21) for communication to take place. '*Text does not in itself establish context but serves to activate it in the reader's mind. And once activated, it can be extended by inference.*' (p. 22). Widdowson (ibid) summarises what has been aforementioned by stating that:

Actually, *context* is a psychological construct, a conceptual representation of a state of affairs. In communication, what happens is that a first-person party (a speaker or writer, p1) produces a text which keys the second-person party (the listener or reader, p2) into a context assumed to be shared. Once the context is keyed in, then it can be extended, or modified, by means of more text: once a degree of contextual convergence.' (p. 22).

When context is not available in a piece of written discourse, readers make use of the text itself and rely on their prior knowledge. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) argue that *"relevant prior knowledge can create the appropriate context within which it is possible to understand and properly interpret the discourse"* (p. 12). Prior knowledge is crucial in written discourse comprehension.

3.2.4. Prior Knowledge

Prior knowledge or background knowledge is an important factor in language interaction and so in written discourse comprehension. As a matter of fact, many attempts have provided "*conventional or stereotypic representations of 'knowledge of the world' as a basis for the interpretation of discourse*" (Brown & Yule, 1983). These representations form a basis for explaining the predictable information that readers are assumed to have in a particular situation (ibid). To explain, the writer is not going to tell his/her readership that in a text about a 'restaurant', for example, there are 'chairs' and 'tables', for this knowledge is generally conceived of by readers (ibid). Conventional aspects of a situation are considered to be 'default' elements. They are assumed without being mentioned (ibid). This type of knowledge is considered as '*stored in memory as a single, easily accessible unit*' (Brown & Yule, ibid p. 236).

Background knowledge is crucial in making sense of a piece of written discourse (ibid). The following example shows the importance of background knowledge activation.

- *The policeman held up his hand and the car stopped.*
(Rumelhart, 1985:267 cited in Alderson, 2000)

This sentence is easily understood when the background knowledge is being activated. It just means that the policeman orders the car to stop which implies that the policeman holds up his hand.

According to the literature, two types of schemata, plural of a schema, play a major role in the reading process: formal and content. Formal schemata include the rhetorical patterns of organisation knowledge; content schemata refer to the subject matter and culture knowledge. Therefore, for comprehending English written discourse, readers are expected to have acquired both linguistic knowledge and rhetorical knowledge and knowledge of the subject matter and culture.

Comprehending written discourse implies the combination of stored information that is retrieved from the memory and the discourse encountered. In short, prior knowledge is crucial for comprehending a piece of written discourse. Pragmatics is also an important element in this comprehension.

3.2.5. Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a very important component in the comprehension of written discourse. It is considered with meaning; that is, with what is communicated rather than what is said or written. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) argue that pragmatics is defined as the interpretation of the written message. Thus, pragmatics is about what is inferred from any message.

In the case of written discourse, the reader and the author communicate via the text. In other words, there is a kind of meaning negotiation between the two parties (Pearson & Tierney, 1984 as cited in Hudson, 2007). The author uses textual and contextual clues that enable the reader to detect his/her intended meaning. In his/her turn, the reader uses his/her cohesive devices knowledge,

background knowledge, content, vocabulary, and context to comprehend the message and infer the author's intended meaning. In this way, the reader can even recognise the intended readership.

4.CONCLUSION

To conclude, for comprehending written discourse, many elements come into play. The aforementioned elements which are cohesion, coherence, context, prior knowledge and pragmatics can fulfil this objective. Moreover and more importantly, the reader should have linguistic competence that assists in the comprehension process. Most importantly, the reader should make use of all those elements to decipher the intended readership and so the intended meaning of the written discourse.

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