

THE RELEVANCE OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

P.J.W. Taylor  
British Council  
English Language Officer

"If structures are dropped as a means of introducing the student to the beauties of English, the alternatives are scant: we cannot go below the sentence, we have to go above it into discourse. The synthetic approach must be dropped and the teaching of discourse substituted for it." (Mextesol Journal - Summer Issue 1979). (1)

These words were part of one of the very first articles - one on syllabus design by Javier Bravo - that I have read since returning to Mexico after some eleven years working in Europe as an English Language teacher and materials writer. His article seemed to me very close to many things that have been floating around in my mind for some time, and which I am now trying to formulate in a publishable form.

Linguists have perhaps justifiably - but to the frustration of many language teachers, - almost exclusively concentrated on the analysis of language at the sentence level, and have expended a lot of energy on looking at even smaller units. Although the link is not perhaps direct - something of this interest also seems to have rubbed off on the syllabus designer and the materials writer - and hence on many teachers too who rely on text books to provide the basis for their work.

Until very recently the whole field of English Language teaching has been dominated by structurally based syllabuses and course books which also have a clearly synthetic approach to language; chopping English up into isolated, manageable chunks which rarely go beyond the sentential level.

The first person who really tried to see language from a 'rounder' perspective was J.R. Firth who in the 1950's hinted at a discourse approach when he said a linguist must look at spoken language from the point of view of 'the verbal process in the context of situation'. Sadly he didn't follow this up much himself - preferring to concentrate on phonology - and so it wasn't really until the present decade that anyone began to seriously examine and recognise the importance of discourse and discourse analysis - of how language fits together to form units longer than clauses or sentences. John Sinclair and R.M. Coulthard expressed how little linguistics had to offer in this field in their early book (1975) called "Towards an Analysis of Discourse". (2)

"In our search for a starting point we found very little within linguistics, which was mainly concerned with the description of language structure up to the rank of the clause. The clauses described almost never had a real context or context and when they did this was only seen as relevant in so far as it provided information useful for the description of the clause".

Perhaps before trying to say why I think a discourse approach is so relevant to English Language teaching I should try and express more precisely what I see such an approach to involve, and how I believe it differs from the more traditional, structurally based one.

First I think one can say with some confidence that discourse is not something that simply consists of grammatically well formed sentences. If you have ever taped conversations between native speakers of English, or even dialogues between teachers and students in a language teaching context - you will see that this is surprisingly true. Language in actual use, whether written or spoken, is not very like much of the grammatically correct language usage one encounters in most structurally based textbooks.

Discourse, however, is concerned with the functional use of language in a particular context, and so the unit of analysis is no longer the clause or the sentence (these are grammatical units), but what some writers call an utterance, or others like Sinclair a 'move'. The label is unimportant but the concept is vital, because it links up the need for materials and methodologies to at least respect students general needs - the need to be able to handle language in use, in a context - whether it be in the pages of a text book written in English but concerned with a different discipline altogether, or in a communicative situation in a conversational context.

A discourse approach recognises the fact that in language use a phrase like "Aren't you coming?" very rarely has the force or sense of being the negative of "Are you coming?" It encourages students to produce more natural responses to questions like "Why did you speak to that girl?" than "I spoke to that girl because....." or "Because....." - discourse analysis is concerned with responses like "I didn't speak to her, she spoke to me and ....." or "I don't know" or "I thought she was attractive....." none of which are likely to occur if we follow the structural course-book pattern. In other words, it underlines the fact that we use language not really to produce sentences as such, but to express concepts and in doing so to carry out a whole range of communicative functions. At this point you may say - well, then the answer is to produce a communicative syllabus - my reply would be, even if this proves to be the case in the future, we don't have any yet - there are a move firmly in the right direction. Further we do have a few course books which partially (3) or fully (4) present their material from a discourse point of view. These books no longer present their content in

terms of the formal elements of syntax and vocabulary (lexis), but concentrate more fully on the concepts and functions these elements are used to realise in language use.

This whole approach emphasises the fact that language is about actual communication and communication takes place through discourse, where meanings are negotiated through the force of interaction - interaction between producer and consumer in the specific linguistic context. It goes a stage further I believe than the listing of functions or notions that have been put forward too - they again really deal with language use without a context, in isolation - they only come 'alive' if they are used in discourse where the area of central importance is how these functions are realised as a specific proposition which follows on from a previous one and links up with what comes later. This is what Halliday and Hassan call 'cohesion' in their useful, but complicated reference work in this area.<sup>(5)</sup>

To summarise so far - discourse deals with how the functional categories of language are realised - with the relationship for example between 'requests' and 'questions' (rather than with the functions themselves); it examines the options the speaker/writer has in expressing such concepts; it is concerned with what in a specific context are the realised forms used to express these and other functions. One could I think say discourse analysis above all is concerned with encouraging language awareness in learners because it is interested in actual use rather than usage; with utterances rather than sentences; with communicative coherence rather than grammatical cohesion.

To my mind grammarians, and many text book writers too, are over-concerned with usage - rules of usage - exemplified in sentences, whereas discourse approaches concentrate on rules of use which attempt to look at how utterances perform social or communicative acts. So rather than looking at sentences or texts (which for me are groups of sentences) - discourse analysis works with utterances which combine to form discourse - not from the point of view of grammar, but from that of overall coherence - how messages are got across often in spite of the form not being strictly grammatical at all.

I see the relevance of this to English Language teaching as increasingly important - both in encouraging student motivation (because it starts by at least recognising the learner may have definite needs and aims other than those of responding to the teacher/ringmaster) and also because it accepts that many students may primarily need English as a means of gaining access to information in another subject. It doesn't hammer away at the form of the language itself which few students really need - but rather encourage them to look at how the sort of language they have to read, or write or use in conversation is put together into paragraphs or passages - how the concepts are woven together to form coherent chunks of English. So it concentrates more on the links between these bits; the essential scaffolding that holds the whole structure together, rather than examining the smaller bits in isolation.

If we as teachers of English are honest we have increasingly to accept that many students in intermediate and advanced levels, and potentially of course in lower levels too, are not studying English through an interest in the language as such - they are studying English because it is the medium of access to the information they need in science, business, engineering or a wide range of other disciplines. If I wanted to study librarianship at an advanced level in Mexico, I would have to do this in part through reading books in English, and I believe that this is true of many other fields too. Structurally based courses don't help the student - beyond a very early stage - to deal with passages of English in the way he needs - discourse approaches I think do get much nearer.

If one looks at the "Focus" series of books which deal with the area of English for science and technology, the writers approach through discourse does identify some of the commonest and most useful communicative acts that the student will need to be able to handle in this particular field of English - namely:- classification  
definition  
generalisation  
explanation.

Scattered through the present eight books the various editors have also been able to draw up lists of some fifty common linking or connecting words and phrases which are vital to the kinds of language students will probably encounter in their own reading, and need to be able to use in their own writing. In fact it is possible to find a very small core of such key words which recur throughout the series - consequently  
however  
for example  
therefore.

I think it is words and phrases like these and parallel communicative acts that we should be identifying and practising with students - just as much as we have tended to consolidate knowledge of structures and ask questions on primarily lexical words in comprehension exercises. The innocent looking linking words and their functions - clearly set out in parts of Halliday and Hassan's book<sup>(5)</sup> - are essential if we consider students' needs both in terms of perception and production.

From research I was recently able to do at Reading University I think it is the linking words, the words which clarify or up date what we say or write as we go along which provide the keys to comprehension of passages of English at least as much as (probably more so than) structures of lexical items.

Looking at English in terms of passages of discourse does I think help students in the very difficult task of learning how to comprehend, respond to an participate in a whole range of language events - whether reading books in a library or talking to native speakers. Equally it

helps to alleviate the eternal dilemma of the poor student who can manage all the teacher wants him to do in the classroom, but who is lost when called upon to apply this knowledge on his own outside the artificial confines of a classroom. Students don't often learn English to be able to perform well in class - but outside - this, however, means teachers have to encourage genuine language awareness, what to look for, how to read or write in a foreign language.

In our own language we are aware of our own language incompleteness - or we should be - new expressions or novel constructions strike us as such, so we also tend to work within our own linguistic capabilities, but this is much rarer in foreign students who don't always have the skills to complete something they have begun in the way they really want to. Very often this is because they lack the discourse pegs, the connectors, the reference words to do so - so the language chunks lack native speaker coherence and become disjointed, dull or clumsy - even though in structural terms they may be perfectly sound.

An approach to teaching based on looking at discourse encourage self reliance in students and language awareness in terms of the communicative value of the content. It doesn't look at syntax to try and establish what is grammatical but rather recognises that English can be and often is fully coherent without being in any textbook way grammatically cohesive.

So my plea is that we should not always look at language in terms of neat, grammatically or structurally cohesive package; not even-encourage the use of structural props, but demonstrate how coherence is achieved by particular sets of features which are not really grammatical ones in essence at all.

If one considers this kind of approach at all valid or beneficial there are some three or four questions one has to seriously consider - and I'd like to end with these.

Firstly, how should we go about selecting samples of discourse? - Should we use authentic passages or write our own? What are the pitfalls in choosing either option?

Secondly, should we simply reserve such an approach for classes with English for specific purposes programmes? Isn't this an opting out of consideration of the needs that many students in general English classes have too?

Thirdly, how can the teacher best handle the techniques of discourse analysis with sufficient confidence to be able to apply them in his or her regular teaching?

Finally, how can we adopt and build upon more traditional approaches and structurally based materials to develop an awareness of the functional aspects of discourse - so that purely grammatical competence is not the ultimate aim and achievement of the captive learner?

I have no space to attempt to answer these questions here, but perhaps the editors will give me the chance to do so in a future edition if they feel at least they spark off a useful dialogue with you their readers.

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- 3) B. Abbs. "Strategies" series (Longman).
- 4) Ed. By Allen J.P.B. and Widdowson H.G. - the 'English in Focus series' (Oxford University Press) - with books covering areas of English for Science and Technology including Physical Science, Social Studies, Medical Science, Workshop practice and mechanical engineering.  
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- 5) M.A.K. Halliday and R. Hassan (1976) - "Cohesion in English" (Longman).