Discourse Analysis and the Teaching of English Language in Nigerian Secondary Schools

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Abstract
This paper views the present trend of structure-focused English language teaching in Nigerian secondary schools as one that is deficient, and therefore not bringing out the desired objectives for teaching and learning a second language. It advocates the adoption of a discourse-oriented approach to teaching and learning. This does not call for the total jettisoning of the old ways of teaching but proposes an alignment and incorporation of language use in context with the attendant focus on the study of the different and varied cohesive devices in a language like English. It concludes that this will improve in no small measure the communicative cum discourse competence of the learners in question, which is by far more superior to mere linguistic competence.

Key words: Discourse competence; Second language teaching; Structure-focus English; Communicative competence; Nigerian secondary school


INTRODUCTION
Discourse analysis is concerned with the study of the relationship between language and the context in which it is used. Zellig Harris, in 1952, coined the term ‘discourse analysis’ and there and then initiated a search for language rules which would explain how sentences were connected within a text by a kind of extended grammar. He was interested in the distribution of linguistic elements in extended text, and the links between the text and its social situation. During the last few years, discourse analysis has assumed an increasingly important role within the study of language, although it has taken a slightly new dimension from Harris perspective. Today, discourse analysis has grown into a wide-ranging and heterogeneous discipline which finds its unity in the description of language above the sentence and an interest in the contexts and cultural influences which affect language use. Discourse analysis generally studies language in use; written texts of all kinds—spoken data, from conversation to highly institutionalized talk.

As a pedagogical concept, discourse analysis evolved out of the criticisms levelled against error analysis. Error analysis has been criticized for focusing too much on errors made by learners at the expense of their non-error productions (Bloom, 1979). It has also been argued that despite the efforts of error analysts, learners still commit errors in their language productions on a regular basis. Above all, it has been noted that even where errors are eliminated among learners, they still have the problem of appropriateness of language usage according to contexts and situations. In the Nigerian situation, Oyeleye (1985) notes that the kind of English that the average user has available for use is the formal, at times, turgid and literary one, which he displays on all occasions. Discourse principles underlie this recognition of coherence which is the topic of study of discourse analysis. For example, the discourse coherence underlying this short dialogue is doubtful (Stubbs, 1983):

A: I feel very hungry today.

B: No

There seems to be no relationship between speaker B’s response to the statement of speaker A. The text does not therefore, form a coherent discourse.

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Blackmore (1988) rightly observes that much work on the interpretation of discourse has adopted the view that the way hearers recover messages from utterance is governed by their assumption that in discourse, contiguous linguistic strings are meant to be interpreted as being connected, or in other words, that discourse is coherent. These connections are not always made explicit: hearers are expected to fill them in on the basis of their background or contextual assumptions. Indeed, unless they can recognize that the segments of the discourse cohere in some way, they will not be able to recover any kind of message and the discourse will be ill-formed.

In the like manner, according to Wisniewski (2006), it is clear from the analysis of written language that when people produce discourse they focus not only on the correctness of a single sentence, but also on the general outcome of their production. That is why the approach to teaching a second language which concentrates on creating analysis is borne out of the effort to correct this type of anomaly in language teaching and learning.

Discourse analysis sets out to answer question such as—how does one characterize and label the unit of interaction; how many different functions are there; how are these functions realized lexico-grammatically and what structures do these basic units combine to form? The other major concern of discourse analysis is the relationship between the discourses and the speakers and hearers by and for whom it is produced (Coulthard, 1977). In the same vein, Brown and Yule (1983) regard discourse analysis as essentially the analysis of language in use. They recognise the two planes that discourse analysis involve. Discourse analysis on the one hand includes the study of linguistic forms and the regularities of their distribution, and, on the other hand, involves a consideration of the general principles of interpretation by which people normally make sense of what they hear and read.

While Crystal (1992, p. 25) defines discourse as ‘a continuous stretch of (especially spoken) language larger than a sentence, often constituting a coherent unit such as a sermon, argument, joke, or narrative’, Stubbs (1983) states that discourse analysis mainly refers to the linguistic analysis of naturally occurring connected spoken or written discourse. It refers to attempts to study the organization of language above the sentence or above the clause, and therefore to study longer linguistic units, such as conversational exchanges or written texts.

Stubbs (1983) further posits that conversation or written texts do not consist of unordered-strings of utterances. Connected speech is clearly not random. People are quite able to distinguish between random list of sentences and a coherent text, and it is the principles which underlie this recognition of coherence which is the topic of study of discourse analysis. For example, the discourse coherence underlying this short dialogue is doubtful (Stubs, 1983):

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There seems to be no relationship between Speaker B’s response to the statement of Speaker A. The text does not therefore, form a coherent discourse.

Usually, we often know what kind of language to expect in different situations; and conversely, given a fragment of language, we can often reconstruct in some detail the social situation which produced it. The identifying features of every discourse include phonology, lexis, syntax and paralinguistics features such as speed and rhythm.

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In the manner, according to Wisniewski (2006), it is clear from the analysis of written language that when people produce discourse they focus not only on the correctness of a single sentence, but also on the general outcome of their production. That is why the approach to teaching a second language which concentrates on creating grammatically correct sentences, yet does not pay sufficient attention to regularities on global level of discourse, might not be the best one (Cook, 1990).

Unity of a text is achieved through cohesion in form and coherence in meaning. Cohesion deals with how utterances are linked structurally and facilitate interpretation of a text. For example, the use of cohesive devices such as pronouns, synonyms, ellipsis, conjunctions, parallel structures and lexical cohesion serves to relate utterances and to indicate how a group of utterances is to be understood as a text. The most comprehensive of description and analysis of these devices is to be found in Halliday and Hassan (1976). Hoey (1991) argues that lexical cohesion is the single most important form of cohesion accounting for something like forty per cent of cohesive ties in texts. By and large, five types of cohesive devices which especially mark out written discourse are distinguished (Wisnewski, 2006). These are:

**Substitution:** in order to avoid repeating the same word several times in one paragraph, it is replaced, most often by *one, do or so. So or do in its forms might also substitute whole clauses (e.g. Tunde is an orphan. I told you so long ago).

**Ellipsis:** it is very similar to substitution; however, it replaces a phrase by a gap. In other words, it is omission of noun, verb, or a clause on the assumption that it is understood from the linguistic context.
1. THE RELEVANCE OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS TO LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Most English teachers tend to view ‘grammar’ as an exclusively sentence-level phenomenon. This perspective is outdated and has had negative consequences for the way in which grammar is described and taught, a sentence-based view of grammar is also inconsistent with the notion of communicative competence (Satya, 2007). To attain command of English language learners should either be exposed to it in genuine circumstance and with natural frequency, or painstakingly study lexis and syntax assuming that students have some contact with natural input. Classroom discourse seems to be the best way of systematizing the linguistic code that learners are to acquire. The greatest opportunity to store, develop and use the knowledge about the target language is arisen by exposure to authentic discourse in the target language provided by the teacher (Wisniewski, 2006).

It is true that today language pedagogy has gone beyond the emphasis on teaching linguistic competence. The current efforts in teaching and syllabus design are now devoted to the teaching of communicative competence. Canale (1983) outlines four major components of communicative competence: grammatical competence, including knowledge of vocabulary, rules of words and sentence formation, linguistic semantics, pronunciation and spelling; sociolinguistic competence, including rules of appropriateness of both meanings (allowable messages) and grammatical forms in different sociolinguistic context; the knowledge required to combine forms and meaning to achieve unified spoken or written texts; and strategic competence. More specifically, discourse competence, which is the concern of this paper, pertain to the mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres.

2. APPLICATION OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS TO THE TEACHING OF GRAMMAR

There are a number of questions posed by discourse analysts with reference to grammar and grammar teaching. In particular, they are interested in its significance for producing comprehensible communicative product, realization of grammar items in different languages, their frequency of occurrence in speech and writing which is to enable teaching more natural usage of the target languages, as well as learners’ native tongue (McCarthy, 1991).

In essence, the teaching of grammar should take adequate care of the traditional concepts like clause, pronoun, adverbial, conjunction, phrase, etc. However, these should be properly related to the less familiar set of discourse terms like theme, rhyme, ellipsis, substitution, reference (anaphoric, cataphoric, and exosphoric), etc. in order to establish the link between grammar and discourse. It is an undisputable fact that without a good command of the rich and variable resources of the grammar offered by a language such as English, the construction of natural and sophisticated discourse is impossible.

The most prominent role in producing sophisticated discourse, and therefore one that requires much attention on the part of teachers and learners is that of words and phrases which signal internal relation of sections of discourse, namely conjunctions. McCarthy (1991) claims that there are more than forty conjunctive words and phrases, which might be difficult to teach. Moreover, when it comes to the spoken form of language, where and, but so, then are most frequent, they not only contribute to the cohesion of the text, but are also used when a participant of a conversation takes his turn to speak to link his utterance to what has been said before.

The above notions that words are crucial for proper understanding of discourse, apart from lexical meaning, are also significant for producing natural discourse in many situations, support the belief that they should be pondered on by both teachers and students. Furthermore, it is advisable to provide learners with context which would exemplify how native users of language take advantage of anaphoric references, ellipsis, articles and other related elements of language which are particularly useful for proficient communication.

3. APPLICATION OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS TO THE TEACHING OF VOCABULARY

Lexis may frequently cause major problems to students, because unlike grammar it is an open-ended system to which new items are continuously added. That is why it requires close attention and, frequent explanation on the part of the teacher, as well as patience on the part of the
students. However, bringing a discourse dimension into language teaching does not by any means simply mean an abandonment of teaching vocabulary. The vocabulary lesson will still have a place in a discourse-oriented syllabus; the challenge is to bring the discourse dimension into vocabulary teaching alongside traditional and more recent, more communicative approaches (McCarthy, 1991).

A discourse-driven approach to vocabulary teaching will teach new words paying close attention to context and co-text that the words appear in. This is especially helpful in teaching and learning aspects such as formality and register. Discourse analysts describe co-text as phrase that surround a given word, whereas, context is understood as the place in which the communicative product was formed (McCarthy, 1991).

From studies conducted by discourse analyst emerge an important idea of lexical chains present in all consistent texts. Such a chain is thought to be a series of related words which, referring to the same thing contribute to the unity of a communicative product and makes its perception relatively easy. Additionally, they provide a semantic context which is useful for undertaking, or inferring the meaning of words, notions and sentences. Links of a chain are not usually limited to one sentences, as they may connect pairs of words, notions and sentences or a text. The relation of words in a given sequence might be that of reiteration or collocation. While collocation is not an important element of cohesion as reiteration, it is still helpful to acquaint the learners its knowledge as collocation might assist in understanding of communicative products and producing native-like discourse.

Since lexical chains are present in every type of discourse, it is advisable to familiarize learners with the way they function in, not merely because they are there, but to improve learners’ perception and production of expressive discourse. Reiteration is simply a repetition of a word later in the text, or the use of synonymy, but what might require paying particular close attention in the classroom situation is hyponymy. Hyponym is a particular case of a more general word, in other words a hyponym belongs to a subcategory of a super-ordinate with narrower meaning (Wisniewski, 2006).

Discourse analysts maintain that knowledge of vocabulary-connected discourse devices support language learning in diverse manners. Firstly, it ought to bring students to organize new items of vocabulary into groups with common context of use to make them realize how the meaning of a certain word might change with circumstance of its abilities to choose the appropriate synonym, collocation or hyponym (McCarthy, 1991).

**CONCLUSION**

It is to be reiterated that the ability to perceive relationships across boundaries, which is discourse competence, is an important skill which learners of the English language in Nigeria need to acquire if they are to succeed in comprehending and producing meaningful utterances in English. To this end, instruction in the discourse competence skills, as exemplified above, should form part of the school’s English language teaching curriculum. Such skills are also enumerated by Canale (1983) and they include the teaching of cohesion in different genres like lexical cohesion in context and grammatical cohesion in context through the media of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Coherence should also be taught through oral discourse patterns through listening, speaking, and reading; and written discourse patterns via reading and writing. Therefore, English language teaching in secondary schools, in order to yield optimum results, should not only take care of the structural levels, but also be concerned with appropriateness of use of languages in terms of discourse.

**REFERENCES**


