

The Role of Discourse-Based Approaches in English Language Teaching in Algeria

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Abstract

In many EGP (English for General Purposes) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) educational institutions in Algeria, English is still taught with the traditional approach which focuses on teaching grammar, the four language skills, etc, and which does not enable students to produce contextualised sentences contrary to discourse-based approaches which focus on discourse rather than the sentence. Discourse-based approaches have had a great impact on the teaching outcomes since they enable learners to become competent users of language. The aim of this paper is to shed some light on the role and implementation of discourse-based approaches in English language teaching, focusing on the importance of discourse analysis, pragmatics, background knowledge and context.

Keywords: communication, discourse-based approaches, ELT, EGP, ESP, discourse analysis, pragmatics, background knowledge, context

ملخص

في الكثير من المؤسسات التعليمية في الجزائر، لا تزال اللغة الإنجليزية لأهداف خاصة و الإنجليزية لأهداف عامة تدرس بالمناهج التقليدية التي تركز على تدريس قواعد اللغة، والمهارات اللغوية الأربع، و ما إلى ذلك، و التي لا تمكن الطلاب من إنتاج الجمل السياقية، على عكس المناهج الخطابية التي تركز على الخطاب بدل امن الجملة. للمناهج الخطابية تأثير كبير على مخرجات التعليم لأنها تمكن المتعلمين من أن يصبحوا مستخدمين اكفاء للغة. الهدف من هذه الورقة هو تسليط الضوء على دور و المناهج الخطابية في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية، مع التركيز على أهمية تحليل الخطاب، التداولية المعرفة الخلفية وسياق الكلام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التواصل، المناهج الخطابية، تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية، الإنجليزية لأهداف خاصة، الإنجليزية لأهداف عامة، تحليل الخطاب، التداولية، التداولية، الخلفية المعرفية، سياق الكلام

Introduction

Traditional ways of teaching dominated the first half and the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century and focused on the sentence as a unit of analysis. There was a belief based on Chomsky's Grammar theory that a competent language user is the one who performs well-formed sentences. However, this tendency resulted in the production of individual, decontextualised sentences among second and foreign language learners.

This led applied linguists, researchers and educationists to focus on other factors contributing to the meaning conveying, to the ability of using the language. For this reason, the communicative approach appeared in the second half of the twentieth century, giving importance to the communicative functions of language use as an integral part of the teaching programme. This trend focused on "discourse" as the basic unit of analysis and took into account the importance of context in which this discourse takes place.

Nonetheless, English language teachers in Algeria still teach in that traditional way either in general contexts or specific ones. It is affected by the traditional teaching contrary to discourse-based approaches which have proved very effective. The major aim of this paper is to shed some light on the role of discourse-based approach to ELT. We shall focus on the importance of DA, pragmatics, background knowledge, context, and on the relationship between form and pragmatics.

1. The role of discourse-based approaches in English language teaching

The term “discourse” appeared in the second half of the second century as the basic unit of analysis (Olshtain&Celce-Murcia, 2001). There is a variety of definitions to the term “discourse” (Celce-Murcia &Olshtain, 2000). Celce-Murcia and Olshtain(*ibid*) define it as:

... an instance of spoken or written language that has describable internal relationships of form and meaning that relate coherently to an external communicative function or purpose and a given audience/interlocutor. Furthermore, the external function or purpose can only be determined if one takes into account the context and participants (i.e., all the relevant situational, social, and cultural factors) in which the piece of discourse occurs (p. 4).

In actuality, discourse has taken a central role since the advent of communicative language teaching (CLT) and ESP. Pennycook (1994 a) argues that “*today it is rare to find people involved in language teaching who are unaware of the significance of discourse for teaching reading, writing, intonation or spoken language, and for the evaluation of students’ communicative competence*” (cited in Trappes-Lomax, 2004, p. 152).

According to Trappes-Lomax (*ibid*), communicative competence includes all the types of competence: grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, pragmatic and strategic. Nonetheless, all of them are considered as discourse competences since they “*account for the ability of members of speech communities to put language to use*”. In the same vein, Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) argue that the main competency in the communicative competence framework proposed by Canale and Swain (1983) is discourse competency, claiming that it is “*in and through discourse that all of the other competencies are realized. And the manifestation of the other competencies can best be observed, researched, and assessed*” (*ibid*, p. 16). In this essence, discourse is to be implemented in the syllabus design, methodology, language assessment, and so on, let alone the learning objectives and the other components of language (Celce-Murcia &Olshtain, 2005). McCarthy and Carter (1994) state clearly:

... an integrative view wherein the over-arching perspective of language as discourse will affect every part of the syllabus, including any conventional system components and functional/speech act components, however they are treated, whether as a series of layers of language, or as realizations within general specifications of discourse strategies (cited in Trappes-Lomax, *ibid*, p. 12).

The main components of a discourse-based approach are: discourse analysis, pragmatics, background knowledge and context.

1.1. Discourse Analysis

Discourse-based approaches have sprung from work on discourse analysis (DA) and communicative approaches to language teaching and language learning. A discourse-based approach to language teaching entails the interaction of a number of elements such as DA, pragmatics, background knowledge and context. The emergence of the communicative approach has been accompanied by the DA framework (Olshtain&Celce-Murcia, 2001). As a matter of fact, DA “*should provide the main frame of reference for decision-making in language teaching and learning*” (*ibid*, p. 707). DA has been defined and explained by many scholars and researchers. According to McCarthy (2001), DA emerged in the 1970s where additional elements were taken into consideration in the process of creating meaning in real situations as texts alone were not sufficient. Cook (1989) defines DA as “*stretches of language perceived to be meaningful, unified and purposive*” (p. 156)

Teaching language via the communicative approach implies the reliance on DA by creating suitable contexts for interaction, illustrating speaker/hearer and reader/writer exchanges, and providing learners with opportunities to process language within a variety of situations. To this end, there has been a focus on sociolinguistic features since they accompany any natural interaction. These have been added to language materials and

classroom activities. There has been a focus on the participants in any communicative event. If real-life interactions are represented in the classroom, then, age, social status, and other personal characteristics of the interactants cannot be ignored, and learners are expected to develop awareness of the linguistic choices which are related to such features. Simulated speech events represent real speech events that occur in natural interaction. For example, in Business studies, a practitioner may expose learners to dialogues about introducing someone to someone else or how to make a telephone call in a business context.

1.2. Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a corner stone in this approach. It is at each component of language, and as taken for granted relying on previous research, it is considered with meaning, with what is communicated rather than said. As Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) argue, pragmatics is related to the interpretation of the message. Therefore, pragmatics is about what is inferred from any message. As in the case of reading, the reader and the author communicate via the text. In other words, they negotiate meaning (Pearson & Tierney, 1984 as cited in Hudson, 2007). The author provides textual and contextual clues to allow the reader to decipher the intended meaning. On his part, the reader utilises his/her knowledge of cohesive devices, vocabulary, content, background knowledge, and context to interpret the message and infer that intended meaning.

1.3. Background Knowledge

Knowledge of the world, *the background knowledge*, as it is labelled in the reading literature, has been dealt with under *schema theory* (Barlett, 1932 ;Rumelhart, 1980 cited in Carrell & Eisterhold , 1983). The latter stresses that any text does not carry meaning by itself , which means that another element comes into play so as to enable the reader to make sense of text (Carrell & Eisterhold , 1983). This element is referred to as the previously acquired knowledge or *the reader's background knowledge*, and its structures are called *schemata* (ibid). So, according to *schema theory*, making sense of text is an interactive process between the reader's prior or background knowledge and the text (ibid). In other words, the reader does not find the meaning of a text just in the sentences themselves, but s/he derives it from the previous knowledge stored in her /his mind and the process through which the reader tackles it (Cook, 2008 p. 121). Put another way, readers make use of the sentences and their prior knowledge to comprehend the topic of the text.

The process of interpretation, according to *schema theory* is guided by bottom-up (text-based) and top-down processing (knowledge-based) (Carrell & Eisterhold , 1983; Silberstein, 1994). Schemata (plural of schema), in this regard, are organised hierarchically, that is from most general at the top to most specific at the bottom (ibid). There are two types of schemata that assist readers, for example, to comprehend texts: formal schemata and content schemata.

As for the former, formal/rhetorical schemata, they refer to the linguistic knowledge the reader has: syntax, lexis, morphology, and semantics besides the rhetorical organisations of texts. That is, L2 learners must acquire the second language before they can read. However ,English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learners should have access to the language of their disciplines; that is, they should know the linguistic and syntactic knowledge before the rhetorical knowledge which comes in the second place. For instance, EAP students who study ESP cannot read texts dealing with topics related to their speciality such as *cohesion, coherence, etc.* unless they have acquired those terms. In the same line, when students are not aware of how information is organised in texts, they will not be able to comprehend those texts easily. One example is a reading article where the introduction summarises the whole article. Unless the reader knows how an article is structured/organised, s/he will struggle to make a distinction between the main ideas and the supporting ones and as a result, the comprehension cannot be attained.

The second type, content schemata, refers to the familiarity of the text content to the reader, which facilitates the text comprehension and makes the text better recalled (Alderson, 2000; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). Moreover, content schemata consist not only of knowledge of the subject matter -the topic of the text- but knowledge of the world and cultural knowledge as well (ibid). Knowledge of the world, background knowledge, is crucial in making sense of a text. 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 poses no difficulty when the background knowledge is being activated. Here, the logic suggests that the policeman orders the car to stop which means that the policeman holds up his hand. Cultural knowledge is also important to understanding texts. However, this depends on the shared culture between the reader and the text

1.4. Context

Context has been defined by many researchers and scholars depending on their schools of thoughts and trends. For Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000), context, in discourse analysis, refers to the non-linguistic and non-textual factors and elements which affect spoken or written communicative interaction. Widdowson (2007) views context as situations which are referred to as circumstances of time and place. He states clearly that *'When people talk to each other, they will naturally make reference to what is present in such situations-present in the sense of both place (here) and time (now)'* (p. 19). He provides examples such as *'The chalk is over there'* (ibid). In this example and other ones, according to the same author, people comprehend what is said by relating the language to the physical context of utterance.

However, context, in written communication, is what is conceived of as relevant, and that *"situational factors may have no relevance at all"* (p.21). This is because the place and time of reading a text is a bit different from the place and time of its production (ibid). Nonetheless, there must be a *"common context of shared knowledge"* (ibid) if not communication will not 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).

In case context is not available in written discourse, readers rely heavily on the text itself and on their prior knowledge.

2. The implementation of discourse-based approaches

In this paper, we argue for the discourse-based approach suggested by Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2005). The authors argue that:

Discourse-based approaches to language teaching allow for target language engagement that focuses on meaning and real communication. Such real communication can, of course, be carried out in speech or in writing with a variety of communicative goals. Learners of different age groups and different levels of language proficiency should have, according to such an approach, many opportunities for natural exposure to the target language during the course of study, as well as many opportunities to use the language for meaningful purposes (p. 734/735).

So, for the authors, discourse-based approaches focus on meaning and real communication. They are used for both spoken and written activities. They are applied to both younger and older learners, and they favour natural language exposure.

Discourse-based approaches, as argued by Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (ibid) take into consideration besides the linguistic function of language, the sociocultural and pragmatic ones as well. In fact, they focus on both form and pragmatics. In other words, their approach relates "form" to communicative purposes and also *"enhances pragmatic understanding of the*

relevant social and cultural contexts within which communication takes place” (ibid, p.735). The authors argue that this approach is best used in instructed contexts where there exists a planned curriculum and where teachers/practitioners are responsible for the process of teaching, but also where students are aware of the role assigned to them to make this process successful.

2.1. Meaning preceding form

For the discourse-based approach proposed by Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2005), focusing and discussing meaning precedes form as claimed by Long (1991) (cited in ibid) since this approach is focused on pieces of discourse within ‘relevant contexts’ either with a written text for a specific purpose ones or with a role-play activity. In this approach, grammatical knowledge needed, for example, is the one embedded in pragmatics and context, for the approach is focused on discourse and communication. As a matter of fact, a discourse-based approach encourages both practitioners and learners to be aware of the relation between pragmatics and grammar. For instance, learners can be taught the English tenses through authentic pieces of discourse such as a story rather than providing them with individual sentences.

2.2. Authentic materials

Communicating through discourse implies the use of authentic materials. These are not written for pedagogical purposes, but for other communicative purposes. They can be taken from many sources such as books, newspapers, magazines, and so on. And because they are written with the native speaker in mind, they may become complex. Then, they can be adapted especially by experienced practitioners. In case, they are inexperienced teachers, it is preferable that they use ‘imitation authentic’ materials (Ur, 1984 as cited in Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2005). However, when the learners are judged to be advanced, teachers are not allowed to make any changes in authentic materials.

Combining authentic language approach with focus on form requires both implicit and explicit learning depending on the age of the learners. Whereas in the first, learners are exposed to a natural discourse which includes the form wished to be acquired, in the second, the learners are “*aware of the target forms or features via explanation, rules, or special highlighting that the teacher provides in the context of appropriate discourse*” (ibid, p. 733). However, the teacher can satisfy both old and young learners since the focus is on discourse.

2.3. Top-down vs Bottom-up Processing

Discourse-based approaches argue for top-down and bottom-up processing integration. Learners can process language through top-down and bottom-up methods. These methods are widely related to the process of reading especially in academic and ESP settings, but to the other language skills as well. Whereas bottom-up processing involves a focus on sentences and words to comprehend the discourse at hand, the top-down processing relies on contextual and socio cultural knowledge for interpreting or producing discourse. In case of reading for information as in ESP settings, for example, students are seen to focus on “the message rather than the code” (ibid, p. 736), but in case texts are difficult such as expository ones, they resort to using bottom-up strategies.

Conclusion

Overall, discourse-based approaches are effective in teaching English in both general and specific settings. Their reliance on discourse analysis and pragmatics facilitates the discourse production and interpretation. Besides, they stress the importance of context and prior knowledge in comprehending both spoken and written discourse, favouring authentic language. Moreover, in these approaches, meaning precedes form. These approaches, as well, permit both type of processing: top-down and bottom-up for making sense of discourse.

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