

## Discourse-oriented evaluation in ELT

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### Abstract:

The methodology adopted in teaching and evaluating learning EFL seems to lack various strands of communication. Neither does it allow for that partnership between the two aspects of discourse analysis: the linguistic and the functional (illocutionary), nor does its scope for the development of students' capacity of use seem tenable. What is more, it does not sufficiently allow them to attend to contextual elements associated with given types of discourse. A model is suggested for the introduction of an interactive component likely to enable students to attend actively to the learning input when being taught and evaluated. This, of course, follows an interactive discourse analysis-based model of teaching. It is argued that a doze of such an interactional discourse 'medicine' will do students much better in the course of building up their discourse competence and hence their communicative competence.

**Keywords:** communicative competence, context, discourse analysis, evaluation, interactive.

### Introduction

Despite the ever-increasing amount of work on developing and evaluating FL learners' communicative competence (Morrow, 1979; Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Swain, 1984; Shohamy, 1985, Davies in Hughes, 1988, Mendelsohn, 1989; Bachman & Palmer 1982; Bachman, 1990; Cece-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000 McNamara, 2000 ; Rose and Kasper, 2001 etc.), there remain, nevertheless, some constraints on evaluating types of competence coming under this general concept (grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic). This is accounted for by the fact that the very nature of the concept does not lend itself easily to those modes of evaluation that are applicable to formal aspects of language. The current study attempts at presenting a model of evaluation growing from the idea that contextual features, at the base of discourse analysis, do not allow for the same evaluation rationale and procedures as those found with those of formal accuracy. (Brown 2001, Hudson 2001)

Human communication takes place in discourse. Discourse is that framework where interactants encode, transmit, negotiate and interpret meaning.

Language learning and language teaching as two sub-areas of the whole human communication business do occur in discourse. Once discourse becomes the unit of analysis, other non-linguistic contextual features that accompany the use of language in both its productive and receptive modes are taken account of. Learners, teachers, curriculum and materials designers should adjust themselves to these requirements.

### A model for teaching discourse analysis

On the above premises, a framework for teaching EFL is suggested. The purpose is to present a model of EFL teaching overshadowing neither the formal, nor the functional (illocutionary) and the contextual. A great deal of cross-fertilization between the two aspects will thus be upgraded. This is a discourse analysis-based paradigm, where discourse is seen as that communicative context whereby inferring and interpreting procedures are triggered.

To implement the model, a methodology is suggested which is likely to promote both linguistic items and doing things with them within discourse. It is a methodology that construes learners' terminal behaviours as communicatively competent rather than as linguistically (grammatically) competent. It is led mainly by the following principles: knowing and doing, process more than product sensitive, previous knowledge and meaning negotiation. The model is expected to lubricate the wheels of an interactive mode of teaching among learners.

In this perspective, learners are exposed, through various materials, tasks and activities to communicative situations where they are required to attend to both the formal and the functional, the propositional and the illocutionary for the purpose of interaction. It is through this interaction that learners will see their discourse competence being built.

Along the discourse analysis training phase, learners undergo an ongoing type of assessment (formative assessment) so as to make them continuously aware of their strengths and weaknesses and provide them with on-the-spot feedback.

### **A model for evaluating discourse**

Evaluating discourse type of competence is not as systematic and well-established as other traditionally taught language items (form, structure, sounds and lexis). Unlike the latter, the former does not seem to lend itself easily to systematic account, objectivity, easiness of administration and all that goes with its nature and purposes.

The argument is that discourse norms that are certainly expressed through linguistic conventions do present evaluation problems related to their indeterminate and unpredictable contextual and social features. This should not be held as a daunting factor in adopting a flexible and a non-algorithmic approach to evaluating this type of competence.

On the other hand, since the aim of adopting a discourse-based model of teaching is not to make learners conform to a particular norm but to make them aware of a variety of TL practices, EFL teachers, curriculum designers, test makers are required to integrate such discourse devices, using a variety of teaching and evaluating means that are likely to make learners cope with different aspects of discourse.

It is argued through the current investigation that discourse conventions can be developed through a range of activities, tasks and situations arranged for this purpose. Evaluating these conventions should have at its base a consideration of the instructional and methodological orientations suggested above. Tasks are, accordingly, designed to evaluate formal and functional aspects of language as means used to communicate one's intentions. Tasks are incorporated into evaluation procedures and are designed to offer testees a wide spectrum through which they will develop interpreting strategies liable to help them process both propositional and illocutionary meanings.

Further, evaluating language as communication is better conceived of as a continuous process (Celcia-Murcia & Olshtain 2000). An ongoing formative type of evaluation will serve the purpose better, in the sense that the teacher will monitor and keep track of his/her learners' progress, and spot their weaknesses and strengths regularly along the learning process and 'prescribe' the appropriate remedy. Any remedial action, in this regard, should be taken in collaboration with learners so as to raise their consciousness of evaluation as a natural stage in the whole process of learning. Needless to say here that such a type of evaluation is more in harmony with a discourse analysis approach to teaching; an approach which serves to make learners communicatively competent. Also, scores will be more informative of students' performance if they are granted on qualitative grounds, i.e. the extent to which learners are able to do tasks, activities, to play roles, taking into account various aspects which fall under the concept to be evaluated i.e. discourse analysis.

Selecting materials for evaluation should be based on the criteria that they create in FL learners the essence of language use, that of promoting their awareness of managing language as discourse, that of attending to the formal and the functional aspects of language, that of coping with cohesion and coherence, that of making appropriate choices of meaning and hence that of enhancing their autonomy in learning that language.

The points raised through the preceding lines of development can all be considered as the foundational philosophy behind the present evaluation component. Yet, the rationale for this component remains that students' knowledge of the form is a necessary, yet insufficient, prerequisite for appropriate use of language. Focus must be laid, when evaluating their

performance, on both the formal and the functional aspects of language, the structural as well as the contextual, the 'organizational' (Bachman 1990) as well as the illocutionary (Hudson 2001, Brown 2001). In order to use language appropriately learners' awareness must be raised through operationalizing both form and function within interactive contexts of communication. They need also be evaluated likewise.

Evaluation objectives are closely related to the rationale behind this mode of evaluation. It (evaluation) serves, in the main, two objectives: to check on both the formal and functional learning progress in order to obtain a certain feedback and to reinforce learning in order to increase motivation among learners. The trend is rather holistic in the sense that focus is on learners' whole performance. Their scores will provide feedback as to their achievement and will serve as input for future work. The intended feedback depends on learners' discourse intake through training sessions. The second objective can be said to be a corollary to the previous one. Along the training phase, it is expected that learners are made aware of their own learning. The more this awareness grows the more interested and motivated they are expected to be.

Items consist of specially selected tasks in accordance with the principles developed along the present study. They are designed to cover elements of discourse analysis such as cohesion, coherence, speech acts and the like. Tasks are to be chosen on the basis of their being manageable, challenging and serving the intended purpose at the same time. Various materials are selected to this end. Consideration is given, in this connection, to the extent to which materials provide input for the involvement of learners in an interactional and heuristic learning experience. Such ingredients as motivation, interest and the like are also considered in the selection of materials for the evaluation of learners.

As far as evaluating procedures are concerned, learners are led to proceed top-downwards or bottom-upwards to work out meanings carried by formal bearings and drawing upon contextual clues (textual and world context) and their schematic knowledge.

### **Conclusion:**

A discourse analysis-based model of evaluation is suggested which stems from an integrative, holistic approach rather than a piecemeal, discrete-point way of looking at language matters.

Research in the area of discourse analysis will continue to bring insights as to the implementation of new findings into FL pedagogy. There is, indeed, a pressing need for FL teachers and learners to adapt their teaching/learning to the ongoing world requirements and develop appropriate teaching and evaluating procedures accordingly. More studies are needed to apply insights from the area of discourse analysis. Future research needs to cover such fields as teaching FL literature, culture, language skills, phonology, etc.

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