

## The Role of Schematic Knowledge in Developing EFL Students' Written Discourse

**Yousra Seddiki** LMD Doctoral Student  
Supervisor: **Pr Noureddine Chaouki**  
Kasdi Merbah University-Ouargla-Algeria

### ملخص:

لقد جاء علم تحليل الخطاب لتغطية العديد من جوانب استخدامات اللغة، ويعتبر مصطلح تحليل الخطاب ملما بالمجالات المتعلقة بالمسائل اللغوية والغير لغوية. ولقد تطور هذا العلم من خلال العديد من العلوم المختلفة مثل علم اللغة، الفلسفة، علم الاجتماع والأنثروبولوجيا وغيرها من العلوم الأخرى. ويحتل علم تحليل الخطاب مكانة هامة في أقسام اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وهو يساهم بدرجة فعالة في تطوير كفاءة التواصل بين المتعلمين. ولهذا، من أجل أن يكتسب متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية القدرة على التواصل سواء كانت كتابيا أو شفويا، فعليهم أن يقوموا بتطوير مهاراتهم الخطابية. ومن بين المهارات التي تدرج ضمن فن تحليل الخطاب نجد المعرفة التخطيطية، والتي تلعب دورا مهما في تطويرها. ونحاول من خلال هاته المقالة البحث عن دور تفعيل المعرفة التخطيطية في تطوير مهارات الخطاب الكتابي لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** علم تحليل الخطاب، الخطاب الكتابي، كفاءة التواصل، المعرفة التخطيطية.

### Abstract

Discourse analysis came to cover several aspects of language use. It is an umbrella term that covers different fields related to linguistic and non-linguistics issue. It has evolved through several heterogonous disciplines like linguistics, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and more. Discourse analysis occupies an important place in the EFL class. It contributes highly to develop learners' communicative competence. Thus, for EFL learners to be communicatively competent, both in spoken and written, they have to develop their discourse competence, among other types of competence. Among the main components under the concept of discourse analysis, schematic knowledge plays a considerable role. The present paper attempts to search the role of schematic knowledge activation can pave the way to develop EFL students' written discourse.

**Key words :** Discourse analysis, Written Discourse, Background Knowledge, Schematic Knowledge. Communicative competence

### Résumé

L'analyse du discours a abouti à plusieurs aspects de l'utilisation de la langue. C'est un terme générique qui couvre différents domaines liés au problème linguistique et non linguistique. Il a évolué à travers plusieurs disciplines hétérogènes comme la linguistique, la philosophie, la sociologie, l'anthropologie et plus encore. L'analyse du discours occupe une place importante dans la classe EFL. Il contribue fortement à développer la compétence de communication des apprenants. Ainsi, pour que les apprenants de l'EFL soient compétents en matière de communication, tant par écrit que par oral, ils doivent développer leurs compétences de discours, entre autres types de compétences. Parmi les principaux composants du concept d'analyse du discours, les connaissances schématiques jouent un rôle considérable. Le présent article tente de rechercher le rôle de l'activation schématique des connaissances peut ouvrir la voie au développement du discours écrit des étudiants EFL.

**Mots-clés:** L'analyse du discours, discours écrit, schématique des connaissances, la compétence de communication.

## Introduction

The scope of discourse analysis grew through a variety of disciplines. It deals with the study of language beyond the sentence. Nowadays, discourse analysis encompasses different operations within a wide range of fields such as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, philosophical linguistics and computational linguistics (Brown and Yule, 1983) It is an umbrella term that encompasses linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of language. Schematic knowledge is one main component under the concept of discourse analysis which helps to understand discourse (written or spoken). The following main points are discussed here: the notion of discourse analysis, background knowledge, schematic knowledge and the role of schematic knowledge to enhance ESL students' written discourse.

## Discourse Analysis

The concept of 'discourse analysis' refers to the study of language beyond the level of the sentence and the relationship between linguistic and the non-linguistic behavior (Paltridge, 2006).

Discourse analysis has developed through various disciplines related to the study of language above the sentence (McCarthy, 1991). It pays more attention to the context and the cultural dimensions that effect language in use. In addition, it plays a crucial role to research in the field of applied linguistics and especially in FL learning and teaching. The scope of discourse analysis is not limited only to the treatment of the spoken mode of communication. It covers also the written mode (McCarthy, 1991).

## Background Knowledge

Discourse can be transmitted through a variety of items called 'default elements'. For example, in a school situation the writer/speaker does not explain objects such as *chair, table, desk, chalk*, etc., because these terms are assumed even if they have not been mentioned before. These items are used as elements of background information (or prior knowledge) to understand a specific meaning (Brown and Yule, 1983).

Prior knowledge is acquired during a considerable period to be stored in the human brain (long-term memory), and activated whenever the brain needs to predict and interpret new information. Comprehending discourse is a 'memory process' of extracting old information from the brain and connecting it with what is being said or written. There are different ways to represent or employ background knowledge to understand discourse. One of these methods is called schematic knowledge.

Schema is a concept which was introduced by psychologists Piaget 1920s and Bartlett 1932s (Widdowson, 1983, 2007). Thereafter, different researchers presented the concept of schema to refer to several meanings of previous knowledge. These meanings fall under the same purpose, namely representing a construction of background knowledge socially shared by a specific community.

Erten and Razi (2009) see that schematic knowledge is divided into two main types: *formal and content schemata*. Formal (textual) schema refers to the concept of how texts are organized, the main features of different writing genres in the case of written communication. Content schema or knowledge of content contains two types of knowledge: background knowledge and subject matter knowledge. In addition, Yule (1996) presents another type of schema, namely *cultural schemata* (abstract schemata). It refers to the role of cultural membership that is needed to fully comprehend the meaning intended by the writer (as cited in, Ketchum, 2006).

On the other hand, Interpreting and expressing language knowledge (in a given language) especially for ELT process requires passing by two essential levels of knowledge, systemic and schematic. According to Widdowson (1983) and Hedge (2008), the former refers to the formal elements of language (syntactic, semantic, phonological and

morphological aspects). The latter represents the non-linguistic elements (which is divided into four issues: general, thematic, genre and social-cultural knowledge) that are considered as the main source of reference in language and which are acquired socially and developed through time.

The term schema is a standard idiom that can be used in different fields such as psychology, journalism, medical therapy, media, business and many other domains. Nevertheless, each of which has a specific purposeful use. Some scholars consider schema as a process of understanding meaning by using all the “schematic bearings» and making a relation between the new idea and everything that is known before in order to make sense and interpret a given text. According to Brown and Yule (1983) schema is considered as a complicated higher standard of knowledge construction that functions as an intellectual scaffolding in order to organize and explain a previous experience for example:

A: There is a tragic romantic movie tonight, do you like to watch it?

B: No, I know how it is going to end.

Therefore, schema is a technique that could be used by the human brain to foresee or predict the different sides while explaining a certain piece of discourse.

Kennedy (1998) states that schema theory refers to a set of patterns and ideas that reflect how humans can understand and interpret knowledge. Schema theorists have developed the concept of schema to add more flexibility when transforming the information. The process of schema has passed over three overlapping steps, ‘the first emphasizes how information is stored or represented in memory; the second, how stored information is used to guide comprehension of incoming information (recalling); and the third how new information transforms previous schema (operational)’ ( pp. 269- 70).

Schematic knowledge plays a crucial role in the process of teaching and learning language skills (speaking, writing listening and reading). For instance, EFL teachers always seek to teach students how to develop their written discourse through activating their schematic knowledge as one of the concrete teaching methods. According to Rumelhart (1981, as cited in Cohen and Cowen, 2008), schema theory is a very important strategy for the teacher to be used each time to introduce new information or text, and if the learner does not have backdrop knowledge on the subject, s/he will not be able to understand a new input (information). Moreover, the teacher tries to be an angler to hook new information with the previous knowledge. Otherwise, the teacher will find students empty handed and they cannot interpret or express any text.

EFL learners should be encouraged to draw upon their schematic knowledge to facilitate their knowledge acquisition. Nassaji (2002) states that teachers should acquaint their students with the schematic knowledge of a text for a high level of understanding. Graham, MacArthur and Fitzgerald (2013) confirm the above mentioned ideas that students come to school with personal knowledge from different sources (movies, cartoons, news, environment and the like) and teachers can benefit from other wide ranging experience through personal narrative stories (called *bed-to-bed story* ). Thence, all students can share the same background knowledge and can write about some events spontaneously.

Within an EFL classroom framework, teachers can enhance their students’ background knowledge and build strong schemata through several methods and activate their students’ mind to be ready to acquire a variety of inputs to be used when producing a piece of writing. Cohen and Cowen (2008) see that developing students’ background knowledge is a fundamental pre-reading activity that can pave the way for learners’ reading comprehension and literacy achievement.

Accordingly, teachers can use a variety of techniques to develop their students’ background knowledge in the classroom and before reading a text. These methods differ from one teacher to another depending on his/her students’ needs and the context, semantic mapping, brainstorming, videos, films, pictures, role-play, trips and so on are all helpful in this context. All these techniques can develop students’ background knowledge and can be used by the teacher to build strong background knowledge and make students more interested and hence more involved in units of study.

Cohen and Cowen (2008) and Kopp (2010) present the following techniques to use more schematic knowledge, prepare student for upcoming reading material, supply them with a scaffolding to be used while reading a text and to enhance comprehension. Teachers can use the following techniques within EFL classrooms in order to develop their students' writing skill.

- 1-Discussion:** the teacher tries always to initiate a debate between the students as a way to extract a variety of ideas and help them to activate their prior knowledge. In addition, students will learn from each other and the teacher will assess his/her student's level and knowledge for further progress.
- 2-Background-generating-activity:** the teacher attempts to engage students in a hands-on-activity before introducing the subject as a way of preparation that can construct students' prior knowledge.
- 3-Questioning and stating objectives:** teachers through asking questions will stimulate students' thinking before starting the lesson.
- 4-Story previews:** students start reading the title, pictures and all that is related to the text and try to open free discussions to understand the meaning of the text.
- 5-K-W-Lchart strategy:** what I Know, what I Want to know, and what I Learned.
- 6-Mapping concept:** scribbling, free drawings, graphs, illustrations.
- 7-Recording observations:** urge students to write some notes in the form of charts as training them for observing carefully
- 8-Key word explorations:** help students to make connections between previous information and the newest one and determine quotes, phrases to attract the student's interest in a new topic.

Schematic knowledge, as a discourse component, plays a fundamental role for ESL teachers and it is one of the important backdrops for English teachers within the classroom context to help their students to acquire the target language successfully. In addition, teachers can enhance their students' background knowledge through introducing and applying a variety of techniques that can encourage students' to extract what they have in their memory and use it to understand and acquire effectively the target language.

**Conclusion** This paper has attempted to look at discourse analysis as an approach that goes beyond the level of the sentence. It has tried to shed light on one of discourse analysis components, *viz* schematic knowledge and its role in developing EFL students' written discourse. Moreover, it has shown the relation between teaching written discourse and the role of schematic knowledge for EFL. Overall, schematic knowledge is a very important feature for EFL learners to acquire the target language successfully, especially its written mode. On these premises, EFL teachers can apply various teaching techniques to activate their students' schematic knowledge to develop their written discourse competence.

## References

- Brown, G., & Yule, G.** (1983). Discourse analysis. C U P
- Cohen, L. V., & Cowen, J. E.** (2008). Literacy for children in an information age: Teaching reading, writing, and thinking. Thomson WADSWORTH Press.
- Erten, I. H., & Razi, S.** (2009). The effects of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension. V. 21, N 1 April 2009 pp. 60-70 (A journal of Reading in a Foreign Language. University of Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University.Turkey).
- Graham, S. MacArthur., & Fitzgerald, J** (2013). Best Practices in Writing Instruction (2en ed.). The Guilford Press.
- Hedge, T.** (2008). Teaching and learning in the language classroom. New York: OUP.
- Kennedy, G.** (1998). Structure and Meaning in English. Pearson Educated Limited.
- Ketchum, E. M.** (2006). The cultural baggage of second language reading: An approach to understanding. Foreign Language Annals, 39, 22–42.
- Kopp, K.** (2010). Everyday Content-area Writing: Write-to-learn Strategies for Grades 3-5. Maupin House.
- Nassaji, H.** (2002). Schema theory and knowledge-based processes in second language reading comprehension: A need for alternative perspectives. Language Learning, 52, 439–481.
- Widdowson, H. G.** (2007). Discourse analysis. OUP.
- Widdowson, H.G** (1983). Learning Purpose and Language Use. OUP.
- Yule, G.** (1996). Pragmatics. Oxford: OUP.