



Arousing the Discourse Awareness in College English Reading Class

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Abstract

Reading without proper guidance from the perspective of discourse analysis will be a challenge and torture for English readers. However, most college students are suffering from this sort of tedious reading dilemma due to a sense of failure and anxiety as a result of an inefficient teaching approach. In this paper, the author tries to combine discourse analysis with reading coaching so as to arouse and promote readers' sense of discourse, with the hope of helping them to read effectively.

Keywords: College English; Reading; Discourse analysis.

1. Introduction

Text learning is one important part in college English learning, and most students and teachers lay the priority in this procedure (Zhang, 2018). Whereas, many college students still find it hard to understand the text thoroughly and thus it's more challenging for them to produce a qualified discourse after years' of English learning and readings. The underlying problem may be the knowledge of discourse analysis, that is, teachers just guide students to focus mainly on vocabulary and sentence translations, neglecting the truth of English reading. Reading actually is led in terms of analyzing the author's thesis, principles and causes of the structure of the text, some writing techniques with the words, that is, the discourse; the paragraphs, sentences and ideas are not loosely scattered, they are inherent connected instead. Therefore, effective reading is a process of recognizing these techniques and interpreting the related combination of them in the process of reading.

The author tries to impart the practice of discourse analysis in college English reading class through guiding students to identify, analyze and to apply these techniques.

2. Discourse Analysis

Halliday and Hasan (1976) make that there are two kinds of connection inherent in a discourse, cohesion and coherence; that is, cohesion means mutual bonds in terms of a discourse while coherence means the context or the thesis of the discourse (Halliday, 1994). This argument established an important foundation for the development of discourse analysis. Coherence refers to the syntactic features, resting on the conditions of misinterpretation of each sentence and the connections among them (Gillian and Yule, 2000).

The author here will mainly focus on techniques of cohesion and coherence in arousing students' awareness of discourse. Bearing in mind these messages, they will better cope with writing and reading in their English learning.

Cohesion refers to the micro levels of techniques among a text to connect the language units, and this category includes reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion. These are basic and visible connections to stick the contents together in the whole text. However, a text may be well cohesive, but may not be coherent in terms of thesis. So coherence means in visible connections like the cause and effect relation, the connections between thesis and supporting materials, parallel relation, or general to specific relations, which need deeper analysis of the whole text. In the reading process, a reader needs to master the two categories in a comprehensive way, so that he/she will be able to sort out the relations, the puzzles among the language units, the hidden connections in a text. In general, college students have the sense of reading with top down sense or bottom up sense, while it's not easy to put the techniques into practice. By leading students to think and spot the discourse devices, it's much easier for students to feel and compare these concepts. So, it's more challenging and useful to guide students to read with the concepts and techniques in a discourse.

The combination of discourse analysis in to reading class has multiple functions in promoting students all-round development (Xing, 2009). First, it can stimulate them to think actively and critically since they are prompted to analyze the text from different perspectives just the same way like problem solving in daily life. Second, this process

is beneficial for them to explore from a novel perspective so that they can bring up an original approach to incidents in learning. One problem with college today is the loss of interest in English learning, but how can they sustain the needed interest in English learning while coached with a wrong concept? Thus, they need such effective guidance, and then they can be confident to take more in English reading. Third, activities and group work about the analysis of the techniques in writing will push them to work harder after class, which assures their consolidation and reviews about the target text. Lastly, this practice can promote their competence of English reading from two levels: English literature appreciation and the other one, the capability of efficient reading in exams. Because they have to take the necessary quizzes, and text reading and production are an important way to test their overall English competence.

3. Discourse Analysis Embodied in College English Textbook

In this part, the author attempts to explain the techniques used in reading with instances from the text book.

Reference means the correspondence between the words and the referee like an object, an activity, or certain features (Hedge, 2002). Here it means the bond between two language units.

Example 1

...over time, my remaining hearing dropped to 20 percent, where it is today...
(Unit 1, Book 1, New Progressive College English)

In this sentence, students have to figure out the word “it”, and its connotation, it should be “my remaining hearing is 20 percent”. So, students have to figure out some of the reference clues, they can get to know the features of such connections in English sentence patterns.

Example 2

Thankfully, there are solutions. Some are large, incredibly expensive, and energy-intensive, such as building cross-continent water-transfer aqueducts, new hydroelectric dams, and massive desalination plants. Some are small, such as using micro water harvesters that condense water vapor out of the air. All of them take a while.
(Unit 5, Book 1, New Progressive College English)

This passage is about solutions nowadays all over the world to coping with water crisis. If students need to know the contents logically, the first step is to get the structure in this paragraph. The topic sentence is clear with the conjunction “Thankfully” meaning the connection with the foregoing paragraph, because “there are solutions.” then, the author elaborate them in two levels with two “some” in terms of ellipsis to signify two patterns of methods by saying “Some are large...Some are small”. English emphasizes logic and brevity in expression, while Chinese stresses on parallel or specific cases. Many Chinese students are puzzled by this contrast. Therefore, they always make mistakes in writings. Recognizing the techniques can instantly point out the thought flow of the author’s argument to the readers quickly.

Besides, the author organizes the information well through the application of hyponym: the large solutions like *building cross-continent water-transfer aqueducts, new hydroelectric dams, and massive desalination plants, and the micro solutions like using micro water harvesters that condense water vapor out of the air.*

So, this paragraph deserves analysis from the writing technique perspective, because it can offer a classic example for students to know how to locate information from the conjunction and the application of general words and specific ones. In this way, students are also provided with an exact example in imitating the writing techniques.

Example 3

In April 1961, President John F. Kennedy said, “If we could ever competitively--at a cheap rate--get freshwater from saltwater, it would be in the long-range interest of humanity and would really dwarf any other scientific accomplishments.” That was one month before his famous moon-shot speech. Before the decade was over, we sent man to the moon and back. But we still haven’t found a solution as to how to get fresh water from saltwater without a lot of money and energy. That’s mainly because our great innovation apparatus has not been dedicated to water. Research budgets have prioritized energy, defense, and health while mostly ignoring water, even though fixing water would help our energy, defense, and health problems. If we spent as much money looking for water on Earth as we do searching for it on Mars, the outcomes might be very different.
(Unit 5, Book 1, New Progressive College English)

In this paragraph, the author is talking about budget on handling water crisis. Substitution and repetition are used together to connect the evidence together. The key theme is “at a cheap rate”, then the author uses “money” twice and “budget” once to refer back to the concept of “cheap rate”, so author wants to make a sharp contrast between the money spent on water issue and other items.

Besides, the author also applies some conjunctions like “but” and “and”, and one reference word “that” to connect the sentences in a logical manner. Halliday and Hasan (1976) analyze four major kinds of conjunctions in English, additive logic words like *and*, contrasting words like *but*, casual logic words like *since, because, so*, etc., temporal words like *then, next*, etc. In a word, if learners can spot these transitional words in reading, they are very clear about the structure of this paragraph (Jia, 2015; Nuttall, 2002). On the contrary, they are confronted with a long paragraph composed by lines of words, neglecting the internal connections in terms of an effective argumentation.

Within the textbook, we can also find out a lot of coherence in reading. For example, teachers can guide students to find out what techniques the author uses in organizing the text. Students will come up with a lot of sequential words at the begging of each paragraph like “when I was three, when I was young, when I was twenty five, When I go to work, For a show, next time” and these words just work in a natural way to connect several

experiences of the author's growth; besides, students can also have a picture of the thesis of the text: the author is physically deaf but he is proud of himself all the way along his growth. Here, students need to read aloud and spot the expressions like "I think I am doing pretty well", "I know you like challenge, but would like to teach a deaf man", "I didn't tell them I am deaf", "I could visually hear the music", "I am a deaf man, why not?" only grasping these expressions in the process of reading the stories of Robbie Wilde could students identify the positive power in an silent and unspoken way.

4. Activities Featuring Discourse Analysis

From the examples above, readers can have a impression of the techniques in guiding students. Furthermore, it is a lasting process, in which it takes along time for students to be familiar with the concepts and the specific devices in doing so. So, teachers have to be persistent in guiding students in various activities of reading the texts. For some college students, it is not easy to learn about these discourse techniques because in the process they find it hard to read in to the lines because they have been accustomed to the old habit of focusing the words and automatic process of translation into Chinese. As a result, they have no chance to experience and thus not are attracted to find out the puzzles or the plot in reading the texts. The problem is that just such kind of lack for patience and habit of critical thinking deteriorates their interest in reading effectively, and it calls for more patience and guidance. Here, the author is going to set some procedures in arousing students to focus on the discourse appreciation.

4.1. Exploration of the Background Information

Reading is not a passive way of receiving information, or it will drive learners to focus on the unfamiliar information such as words and sentence meanings. Instead, it calls for predictions and sufficient background knowledge about the subject to be discussed. At least, the readers needs to be curious about the topic and something about the author, then they can think about what is being talked, why the author talks about it this way, and what is his claim or why the author takes the perspective in writing. Therefore, two level of preparations are needed: one is about the topic and the author; and the other one about language preparation. Activities for this part could be like the followings:

Questions about the topic discussed. Taking the text of water crisis for example, students needs to know something information about the current water situation, the causes, the projects and gravity of water crisis. So, it is necessary to assign them some presentations about the questions above, and then it will be easy for them to read some familiar information, for it can lessen their anxiety and they may get more messages about the issue to be talked. Only with personal practice and hands on exploration, could students get more detailed information out of the classroom.

Offering reading materials. It is suggested to learn in a more extensive manner than they think. Four years in college is a key period for students to know how to learn and how to think critically, searching for different perspectives about one subject is essential for students to cultivate a comprehensive to look at the problems. For example, before learning the topic of generation gap between the baby boomer parents and their children, students are required to read one article about different educational options from five generations, since the offered reading could assist them in better understand the target discourse. By summarizing that each individual's view about education may be influenced by the personal growth and social background, students will come to understand why the baby boomer parents hold the view of overcharging for their children. What's more, they can appreciate why the author is so angry in terms of the words used and actively claim for freedom for the younger generation.

4.2. While Reading Activities

1. Predicting based on the topic. Sometimes, words in the title can be the most summary of a text and by predicting or stimulating students to waken up the schema about the topic is useful in assisting thesis
2. Locating the structure. Before getting to read the lines, students need to read through the text to have a basic idea of the layout and the main structure of the text. Only after getting the general path for writing and a top-down impression of the text, can a reader read clearly and smoothly. In general, Chinese students just neglect this significance, while jump to the words or phrases, the more words they take in, the more obscure they come to find about reading.
3. Reading for the transitional words and topic sentences. By locating the transitional words, a reader can quickly figure out the key thesis or main argument with its own evidence, thus, it's getting easier for students to grasp the meaning or plot of a text. When taking the CET exam, many students are confronted with anxiety and the length of the text, while they do not know how to find a way out. The main cause is that they lack for these techniques in reading and nobody tells them to do so.
4. Reading for details. A good writer is specific in choosing the right words for demonstrating the most exact thought, which needs readers to arouse the same emotion and the same imagination with the author. There are avoidable some special words or complicated ones for readers, which poses a great challenge for appreciation. Therefore, readers can search information for certain unfamiliar words or the connections between several items concerning the application of reference, substitution or hidden connections.

4.3. Post Reading Activities

Transferring and further reading. After a long term of guidance in spotting out the techniques in discourse planning, the students should be assigned some tasks to read on parallel. Thus, they need to read for further

consolidation of the discourse identifying or for more extensive information. In this way, they can confirm their understanding of techniques in detailed or extensive reading.

Parallel writing. Writing is one important part in terms of students' English competence, and it is a form of consolidating and broadening students language view and English thought pattern. For years, English writing is a big challenge for most Chinese students, due to one key issue: lack of knowledge about discourse. Actually, Chinese students are under great pressure and anxiety towards writing, but they do not know how to refine their articles and where should they work harder at even they try to recite samples and vocabulary. The key factor is that they do not know how to organize the messages into a discourse in the western part, not in the Chinese ways. So the concerning English problems are always like these followings: no precise thesis, lack of clarity, no cohesive devices, and lack for logic in terms of units of the whole text. In a word, if Chinese students want to improve writing, they have to impart knowledge about discourse analysis to the process of planning, choice of vocabulary, structure and so forth.

Imitation is one effective approach to enhance students writing through encouraging students to focus on the structure, cohesive techniques and the coherence in a text. In this process, students could not only get extensive information in a short time, but also acquiring the writing guidance in a more specific and concrete way. Thus, students will not be bored and they can be more confident in production. Besides, writing after reading is one way for students to consolidate what they have got about the discourse techniques. With the gradual guidance of discourse knowledge, students can be guided in the path of imitation to free writing as a result.

5. Conclusion

Reading is not just about the recognition of unfamiliar words and phrases, instead about identifying the writing techniques and resonate with the author. Therefore, it's a complicated process involving critical thinking, predicting, assuming and searching for hidden clues, all of which needs the readers to take a close look at the discourse features. Suppose a student equipped with a basic knowledge about how the author writes the text, it is smooth and easy for him/her to appreciate the writings in a more interesting way. Thus, it is necessary to arouse students' senses of discourse techniques in writing in college English reading class.

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