

An Analysis of Primary School Students' Reading Competence in Using Cohesive Devices

Jinxiu Jing

School of Foreign Languages Leshan Normal University Leshan, China

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Abstract

Cohesion devices are an important and key part of discourse analysis through English learning. Based on problems in current English reading classes in primary schools, like lack of critical thinking competence, broken lexical knowledge, or ineffective reading habits, this paper aims to call for the necessity of guiding primary school students to gradually strengthen the awareness of analyzing the cohesion devices in text reading so as to lay a sound foundation for their future literature appreciation.

Keywords: Reading competence; Cohesion; Texts; Primary school.

1. Introduction

In many of China's primary schools, Chinese teachers of English would like to compare the process to translation or vocabulary teaching. However, when students come to Middle school, they will be puzzled by long passages of texts, feeling frustrated because of the failure to understand the texts even they know each word, or most of the words printed, let alone to say how those students are expected to write an essay with a sound structure. These consequences all embody one neglected problem in English teaching: lack of discourse analysis. Therefore, in this paper, the author is going to explore how to raise students' awareness of discourse analysis via guiding them to look closer at cohesion devices in primary school English reading.

2. Current Discourse Teaching in Primary Schools

Investigations into language teaching in primary school clearly demonstrate to us the shortcomings in how to guide students to read scientifically and effectively. The majority of the causes lie in teacher's ideologies in text analysis.

Teachers' ignorance of discourse teaching. Some teachers do not know how to read a text effectively and they have to take it in an easy method, that is, translation, assuming that students will understand the passages as long as they know each word. Therefore, in their class, it is easy to find evidence like reciting words without the passages, full pages of grammar points and structures, requirement of writing a structure for many time, etc. The author here is not to deny structural view on language, but calls for a more comprehensive way to read and think in the process of get in information from printed words (Shen, 2013).

Moreover, those teachers probably lack for appreciations of discourse analysis. They may be instructed to pay attention to the theme, the contents, but they may not know how the themes or thesis of a story is embodied in series of sentences and their complicated underlying logical relations.

Currently, discourse analysis in terms of linguistic sense is seldom mentioned in primary school English learning, focusing on the analysis of *themes instead*. That is to say, the priorities are always given to tasks designing, contents (Chen, 2021), writing competence or speaking, which has nothing to do with linguistic analysis of the hidden logic relations among the sentences or even a passage.

However, it can not be denied that there is no necessity to teach students some knowledge about the significance of logic bonds among a discourse. Thus, in this paper, the author will mainly focus on text analysis in higher grade English reading in primary schools.

3. Cohesion in Primary School English Textbooks

Cohesion refers to the bonds or connections among each linguistic unit in a passage, with two categories of devices, namely, grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. Further, they could be specified as reference, ellipsis, substitution, and conjunction going to the first category while reiteration, synonymy, hyponym and collocation going

to the latter one. Those cohesion devices embody the connections among sentences, or paragraphs, and stick them into a unit (Luo, 2003), they form a tangible net in the text (Huang, 2001). They are the visible connections throughout an expression, and tracking down their connections can greatly enhance the understanding competence of young learners.

Discourses in primary school English textbooks are always short and easy to understand, they are always in forms of dialogues, chants and short passages. Sometimes, there will be groups of sentences going under related pictures just for practicing some structures or words. In the lower grades, this is common to drill some structure patterns, but it does not mean we can not proceed to the next grade, which calls for rounds of discourse analysis gradually according to students cognitive development and English learning.

Discourse analysis is a linguistic term and it was raised by Halliday and Hasan (1976), they took that the word text is used in linguistics, referring to any passage, spoken or written, of whatever length that does form a unified whole. In this way, text is closely related to information disclosure and context.

4. Cases for Critical Reading via Cohesion Analysis

In teaching discourses, teacher are expected to analyse the texts from the perspective of discourse organization, which can not only help them guide students in an easier and more effective way to understand the discourses, but also stimulate students to develop their capability of critical thinking because students are invited to look closer into the story and sort out the complexities in the stories (Qi, 2017), during which process they are unavoidably explore and test their assumptions along the process. In the followings are some teaching cases about the rationales in guiding students how to read the passages effectively.

4.1. Conjunction

In primary schools, discourses are always presented in forms of dialogues or letters, students can easily recite and know the logical words like *but*, *and*, *then*, *so*.

Case 1

--*But I'm hungry. Can I have some sweets, please?*(Adapted from textbook for Grade 4)

It is extracted from a dialogue, and students could get the idea of the sentences because they know the single word. The problem is, they may not know the correct use of the *but* if teachers fail to offer a complete sentence with two parts connected by *but* in a discourse. So, in one text from Grade 5, there are sentences for description like:

The stones are very big, but they looked very small from the sky.

In this way, students can gradually feel and identify the different usages of *but*, which then may help them to read and think more clearly in a longer reading. However, this is part of the story, what if one student fails to notice this phenomenon in his/her learning and reading? Is it necessary for a teacher to point it out?

Case 2

---*Daming, your cousin will love this kite. It's a Chinese dragon.*

In this example, teachers can guide students to think and read in a more careful way:

T: Please read the sentence carefully, and think about one question: "Why does he think that Daming will love this kite?"

Surely, students are encouraged to read out the hidden relation between the two sentences, and those who succeed in thinking and analyzing will come up with one assumption: "his cousin loves Chinese culture" based on a reformed sentence with a "because": "Your cousin will love this kite, because it's a Chinese dragon".

Therefore, an English teacher will promote students' capability of critical analysis through such kind of thinking challenges on discourse analysis. Thus, students will be more involved in the process of learning of a text instead of reciting the sentences without exploring into the underlying connections.

4.2. Reference

This is a very common logic demonstration in English expressions as well as in textbooks for primary school English. But students can just have a general idea about the connections. Once some clauses are introduced to middle school or college students, it will be challenging for them to stop and restore the awareness of reference analysis, for example: *the reason energy and water sit at the top, ahead of food and poverty, is that addressing them makes subsequent problems easier to deal with*. In this sentence, the reference words are the key to the comprehension of the relations among the words, thus, *them* refers to energy and water while *subsequent problems* means the other problems on the list except *energy and water*, whereas many college students still mistake *subsequent problems* as *food and poverty*. Therefore, knowing the cohesive features of English language is necessary and it calls for attention from the very beginning of English teaching.

Case 3

Ms Smart: But both your red T-shirts are there. They are wet.

Sam: Then whose T-shirt is it?

Lingling: It's mine.

In this adapted material, Sam and Amy were arguing about the T-shirt on the line, while *Ms Smart* at last came out and told them the truth. There are a series of reference words like *both*, *your*, *there*, *they*, *whose*, *it* and *mine*. A teacher may be likely to teach students literally, which is acceptable but it is short of the fun to analyse the plot and the trick and charm of English words. So, teachers can pay attention to these references and encourage students to come up with their analysis through sorting out the exact subjects for these reference words.

T: Now, "But both your red T-shirts are there." Where does Ms Smart want to say?

Ss:...

T: Yes, where goes to "on the line, not here, not it". Two t-shirts are there.

Now, we have a problem, are those their T-shirts? Please find out what does it mean by "they" in the sentence "They are wet."

Ss:...

T: Some says that they refers to "Sam and Amy's red T-shirt on the line." Then, it is not sam's, it is not Amy's. it is... Lingling's. So , what does Lingling say? Yes, "it is mine." mine refers to Lingling's red T-shirt.

In the above model, every student can think and watch carefully, experiencing the fun of exploring the references in reading, not listening to the class passively.

Case 4

--Is China in the UN ?

--Yes. China is one of the 193 member states in the UN.(p.51 Adapted from Grade 6(1))

Also, in this dialogue, it is a method of rote learning if students are required to recite the meaning of one, "of the same kind or quality", but students are deprived of the right to feel the complete sense of a remark. Therefore, teachers can guide students to think in the following way:

T: Can you specify the words going to "one"?

Ss:...

T: In other word, can you find the word group with the same meaning of *one*?

Then, students are invited to relate *one* to the group of words *a member state*. Without realizing and exploring a complete sense of a sentence, a learner will never truly be able to appreciate the charm of a language, let alone to say to use it at will in the future.

4.3. Ellipsis

The phenomena of omission is widely spread in primary English learning, such as *look, Yes, she is; how many?* Most students can understand them, because of two reasons, that is, high frequency of application and simple context. Once ellipsis is used in a more complex context, readers can not be sure that every student can grasp the lost part and com up with the correct and original contents implied.

Case 5

--Do you want to go into the building?

--Yes, I do. But can we? (Adapted from Grade 6-1, p.51)

In this dialogue, there are two happenings of cohesion techniques: *do* and *can*. In this case, teachers should encourage some students to fully understand the omitted part,

T: there is one part missing in the last sentence. Can you tell us what we can do there?

So, *But can we* should be *but can we go into the building?*

Case 6

Look at these children's hats. There are toy chicks and flower on the hats. Do you know why? They are Ester hats....They are Easter eggs. Some Easter eggs are big and some are small.(p.51 Adapted from Grade 6(1))

In this passage, there are two traces of ellipsis: *why* and *some*. As to *why*, teachers can directly tell students that *there are some words missing, can they find the omitted part.*

T: *there are some words missing, can you find the omitted part to this sentence.*

Do you know why (There are toy chicks and flower on the hats)?

But, as to the next sentence, teachers need to test students analysis of the sentence:

T: *Some Easter eggs are big and some are small.* In this sentence, some Easter eggs are big, we can understand it, but the part *some are small* sounds a little strange, can anybody tell us what is the difference between the two parts?

With such eliciting question, students will read the sentence structure and find there is a word eggs missing in the next part of the sentence. Consequently, they can experience the function of ellipsis and the rules in applying ellipsis in English language.

4.4. Reiteration

Reiteration is always used in a passage in order to construct visible connections among a passage and as well for achieving the beauty of parallel structures. Whereas, in texts for children, reiteration can also be used for consolidating the intake of a structure or a phrase like the quoted part above.

Case 7

Dad goes to work at 7 o'clock, 7 o'clock, 7 o'clock

Dad goes to work at 7 o'clock, 7 o'clock, 7 o'clock. He's a busy man.

Mum goes to work at 7 half past six, half past six, half past six.

Mum goes to work at 7 half past six, half past six, half past six. She's a busy woman.

(Adapted from Grade 5(2), p.43)

By using the same structure, students' attentions are stimulated more than once, and the combination of music beat together caters for students learning style in the primary school.

Case 8

I went to Chinatown in New York yesterday. I had a big surprise. There were Chinese people everywhere. There were lots and lots of Chinese shops and restaurants. The people spoke Chinese and English. (Adapted from Grade 6(1))

In the same way, reiteration is used in this passage in term of parallel structures introduced by *there were* and also the same words *Chinese*, to highlight the atmosphere and the cultural surroundings in Chinatown, inviting readers to be immersed in a feeling of prosperity. For students in higher grades in primary school English learning, it is necessary to create and give students some chances to feel the beauty in writing and the importance of contagious words.

4.5. Hyponym

This phenomenon can be seen in typical English writings or thought patterns when introducing a subject. And from the beginning of English learning, we are supposed to demonstrate to students the most basic and original style of narrating an idea.

Case 9

You can do lots of things in libraries. You can borrow books, CDs and DVDs. You can use the computers. You can do your homework. But you can't talk to your friends. (Adapted from Grade 5(2), p.23)

The theme is *do lots of things, therefore, including borrow books, CDs and DVDs; use the computers; do homework*, with the following personal rights.

4.6. Antonym

In primary school English texts, it is easy to find the expressions in contrast, sometimes in order to highlight the usage of adjective or one particular sentence structure. Then, the text may be in forms of chants or dialogue; for example: *it's small, but it's heavy; it's big, but it's not heavy*. In this pair attached to two related pictures, which help students understand the connotation; and through observation students can find the connecting antonyms of big and small.

Case 10

Six years ago, they spoke only a little Chinese. Now they can speak a lot more. (Adapted from Grade 6(2))56

From the collocation words like *six years ago, now*, it is implied that the two sentences are in contrast. Therefore, *spoke only a little* and *speak a lot more* are in comparison, then it is concluded that *a lot more* go against *a little*, it means much or getting better. In order to guide students to think, teachers are supposed to make clear the logic in the words to students. Thus, young learners can be presented with a closer observation at a language different from their own languages (Leng, 2021).

5. Conclusion

Reading is a process of decoding messages from the written texts, so analysis is unavoidable. Therefore, in primary school English teaching, teachers are supposed to endow students with an effective approach to derive the hidden information from reading at the time of extracting theme or contents from a text. However it does not mean an extreme analysis of the connections among a text mechanically by depriving the fun of reading for pleasure or reading for information, it is claimed that a sound analysis of cohesion devices in accordance to students cognition and English proficiency.

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