

Higher Levels of Discourse and Understanding of Language Use

*Iraj Safaei Keshtegar
Yerevan State University*

Introduction

In the past the tendency has been to concentrate on usage on the assumption that learners will eventually pick up the necessary knowledge of use on their own. There are traditions within linguistics which have always placed emphasis on meaning and use. The most influential linguist is M. Halliday. He says, "The more we are able to relate the option in grammatical systems to meaning potentials in the social contexts, the more insight we shall gain into the nature of language system" (Halliday 1985). He is completely at odds in this view with Chomsky (1957) who assumes that actual language is degenerate and deviate from the rules of grammar. According to H.G. Widdowson discourse analysis refers to the investigation into the way sentences are put to communicative use, discourse being roughly defined therefore, as the use of sentences (Widdowson 1979). "The schemata, or shared contextual assumptions are of their nature unstable and negotiable in the process of overt interaction" (Widdowson 2004). "The intended interpretation of an utterance is not decoded but inferred, by a non-demonstrative inference process - a process of hypothesis formation and evaluation" (Wilson 1994).

We can conclude that the mastery of language use – teaching students how to mean as well as how to form should not be neglected. Being a communicator, having what D.H. Hymes calls communicative competence, involves more. Now that sentences are not supposed to be created, manipulated and assessed in isolation, and it is necessary to reveal more about the learner's communicative competence, the concept of higher levels of discourse must in some sense be central.

Subjects

Seventy-two male and female subjects were randomly selected among the university student population studying General English. The subjects were randomly assigned to two groups of 36 students each. One group became the experimental group and received the special treatment (Higher Levels of Discourse), and the control group which did not receive the treatment. The students' level was low-level in both the experimental and control groups.

Materials

In the present study 8 extracts have been taken from real-life contexts and situations. A transcribed speech, an interview, a telephone conversation, three daily conversations, a newspaper article and a letter have been selected for the content of these extracts. Each of these extracts was followed by some questions. The questions had been devised so that students' understanding through higher levels of discourse (social relationship, shared

knowledge, discourse type, discourse structure, discourse function) could be tested. The treatment was given to the experimental group in Persian.

Procedure

In this research a pilot study was conducted, the treatment together with extracts were administered to three students who were studying General English. The results of the pilot study pinpointed that the meanings of some unfamiliar words should be given to students in Persian in order to make the piece of discourse more comprehensible. A pre-test was administered before the treatment in order to capture the initial differences between the experimental and control groups and make the groups more homogeneous. Fifteen minutes were considered for reading and answering the questions. A post-test (4 extracts) was administered after an interval of two weeks. The post-test was intended to help us find out the differences between the two groups which are due to the higher levels of discourse (the treatment). The experimental group was asked to read the treatment (higher levels of discourse) which had been given in Persian. So each subject received 4 extracts for pre-test and 4 other extracts for post-test.

Results

The extracts of each subject were scored. Four qualified and independent judges gave an overall evaluation of the students' pre-tests and post-tests. In this study inter-rater reliability was crucial, in order to estimate judgments one rater will also be arrived at and agreed upon by another rater. So each extract was given a point by four judges and the total score was taken into account as the ultimate score. The mean, standard deviations for pre-test scores are presented in the following table:

| Group | N | <u>X</u> | S.D |
|--------------|----|----------|-------|
| Experimental | 36 | 59.19 | 10.88 |
| Control | 36 | 56.41 | 10.72 |

It is obvious that the experimental and control groups are comparable and homogeneous. The difference between their means is not significant. Therefore, the baseline knowledge of the two groups about higher levels of discourse can be considered equal.

In order to study the significant effect of the higher levels of discourse on the understanding of language use, the data was submitted to a t-test the results of which are shown in the following table:

P=.05

| Group | N | Mean | S.D | t-critical | t-value | d.f |
|--------------|----|-------|-------|------------|---------|-------|
| Experimental | 36 | 66.58 | 15.44 | 2.000 | 2.89 | 70 |
| Control | 36 | 57.54 | 10.57 | | | Group |

Therefore, the claim that the higher levels of discourse promote understanding of language use has been supported.

Conclusion

The experiment reported in this study indicates that one might make authentic materials more comprehensible and facilitate students' understanding of them by providing information on the higher levels of discourse.

Besides, the findings of this experiment are perhaps not so surprising when one considers what D.H. Hymes (1972) stated about the importance of the rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless. According to D.H. Hymes a person who knows only how to make or recognize correct sentences without any other considerations, would be likely to be institutionalized for saying all kinds of inappropriate, irrelevant and uninteresting things.

Being a communicator, having what D.A. Hymes calls communicative competence involves much more. So the higher levels of discourse revealed most about the learners' communicative competence.

The findings of this study are also consistent with what H.G. Widdowson (1978) stated about knowing a language. He says that knowing a language should be supplemented by a knowledge of what sentences count as in their normal use. According to H.G. Widdowson (2004), in the grammar, the systems are kept apart. In actual use, however, they are not. When the semantic resources are actualized pragmatically as text, they act upon each other in various ways like TOPIC/COMMENT or GIVEN/NEW and it is a matter of interpretation beyond analysis. The results also confirm the higher levels of achievement stated by M. Halliday (1994) as a contribution to the evaluation of the text. At this level, the text is interpreted externally in relation to context. M. Halliday explains that we are concerned not with what texts mean but what users mean by texts in their realization of their communicative purposes.

Moreover, as it is clear from the present study, learners in approaching a piece of discourse need to take some linguistic and situational detail as a cue and form a general hypothesis they deal with a piece of discourse.

Pedagogical Implications

Discourse analysis is a rapidly expanding field providing insights into the problems and processes of language use and language learning. It examines how stretches of language, considered in their full textual, social and psychological context become meaningful and unified for their user. By taking into account the higher levels of discourse we can gain some insights into problems and processes of language use and language learning.

H.G. Widdowson (1984) states that indexical meanings must be achieved by the language user associating symbols with some relevant aspect of the world outside language in the situation or in the mind. H.G. Widdowson seeks a model of language use in which

meanings are realized in context. So context refers to the features of non-linguistic world in relation to which linguistic units are systematically used. Students who are familiar with the higher levels of discourse, can achieve meanings both indexically and contextually.

Higher levels of discourse can serve as an aid to the teachers to provide a general idea of a piece of discourse in the classroom. They can help the students to develop their communicative competence.

Moreover, higher levels of discourse have implications for textbook writers. They can devise questions based on higher levels of discourse and provide the learners with the authentic materials based on the everyday-life situations. Higher levels of discourse will serve as a means for deeper understanding of a piece of discourse.

Theoretical Implications

Teachers of language try to turn to the processes involved when a language learner deals with a piece of discourse. The outcome of this research provides implications for revealing more about communicative competence. The proposed model in the following figure presents some of the processes which can be used in the development of communicative competence.

Texts& dialogues

Information about higher levels of discourse

Texts& dialogues

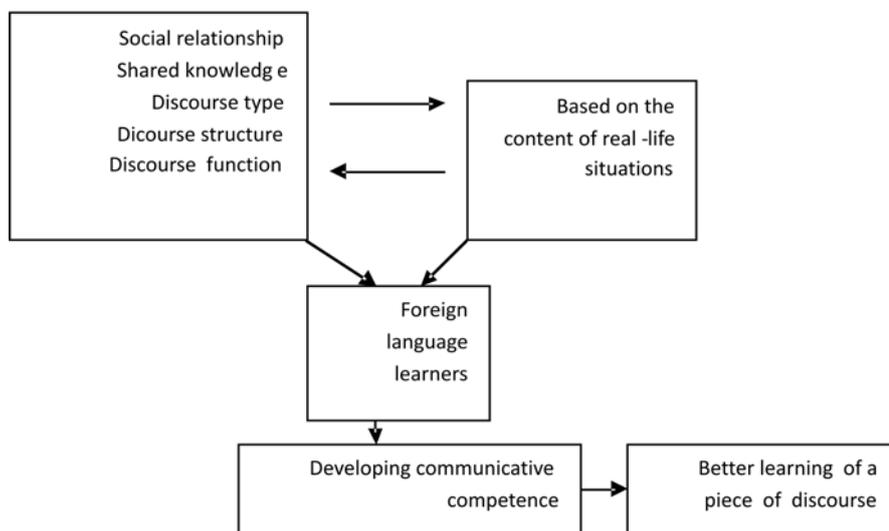


Figure 1. some of the processes used in the development of communicative competence

The input to this model is the information about the higher levels of discourse together with texts and dialogues (based on the everyday-life situation) on the basis of which foreign language learners develop their communicative competence and the output is better learning of a piece of discourse. Hence, better understanding of a piece of discourse takes place as a result of the interaction between these processes.

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Գիսկուրսի բարձրագույն մակարդակները և լեզվի կիրառման իմաստավորումը

Գիսկուրսի վերլուծության տեսությունը գիտական ընդարձակ ոլորտ է, որտեղ համագործակցում են մի շարք գիտական ավանդույթներ, այդ թվում՝ լեզվաբա-

նությունը, ճանաչողական հոգեբանությունը, սոցիոլոգիան և արհեստական ինտելեկտը: Մույն հոդվածում փորձ է արվել բացահայտել դիսկուրսի բարձրագույն մակարդակների դերը լեզվի կիրառումը իմաստավորելու գործում: Այդ նպատակին հասնելու համար պատահական ընտրության կարգով ընտրվել են ընդհանուր անգլերեն սովորող յոթանասուն երկու արական և իգական սեռերի ուսանողներ: Մույն ուսումնասիրության արդյունքները համապատասխանում են Հայմսի՝ լեզվի կիրառմանը վերաբերող հայտնի դրույթին, ըստ որի առանց լեզվի կիրառման կանոնների իմացության քերականական կանոններն անիմաստ են: Մույն հետազոտության մեջ որոշ մեթոդական խորհուրդներ են տրվում բուհերի դասախոսներին՝ իրենց ուսանողների հաղորդակցական հմտությունները զարգացնելու նպատակով: