

THE ROLE OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION: A GLANCE AT TEACHERS', LEARNERS' AND RESEARCHERS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The concept 'Discourse Analysis' is associated with a wide range of activities. The fields that contribute to Discourse Analysis include linguistics, principle of information exchange, interactional sociolinguistics, literacy studies and conversational analysis. Understanding a piece of discourse involves textual, contextual, linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge. In education, Educational Psychology has shown that at all levels of educational process, discourse plays an important role. Education itself is a discursive discipline. Lessons, transactions, teacher/learner interactions can be fully understood if the detailed structures, conditions and functions of the discourse processes are involved. This paper discusses discourse analysis in relation to the roles it plays in language education. The introduction portrays the conceptual meanings of discourse analysis. Some steps are provided on how to go about discourse analysis as far as discourse research is concerned. The paper also looks at the functions of discourse as regards the roles language plays in educational and social contexts. The paper then illustrates classroom situations in discourse analysis as regards interactions between teachers and learners. In the end, discourse and education in relation to the goals of educational institutions as well as discourse and educational researchers are relatively discussed; while a general summary promulgating the role of discourse and language in education and general phenomena conclude the paper.

Introduction

Discourse Analysis is a reaction against the traditional linguistics, grammatical analysis and the traditional way of teaching language. As simply put by Olateju (2004), discourse analysis is primarily the analysis of language in use. It is also seen by Olaofe (2005) as the study of larger linguistic units such as conversational exchanges or written texts. Its focuses on how texts are generated, disseminated and accepted (Yannian 2023). Discourse analysis is related to communication in different ways. These involve aspects such as having a speaker or speakers, conveying a message and receiving a message, having a channel of communication such as the written mode and spoken medium. It is a general term for a number of approaches to analyse written, vocal, or sign language use or any significant event. As such, discourse analysis explores recent advances in understanding how narrative structures shape personal and social identities in the society (Patel, 2023) Many disciplines and educators have become interested in discourse analysis because of the rapid growth in communication media, which

has created a new avenue for language use. General linguists pay more attention to the formal properties of a language while the discourse analysts examine the function of language (written or spoken). In the age of computer literacy and innovations, discourse analysis transforms traditional analysis into modern methods of analysis of discourse (Lee and Smith, 2023). It explores new frontiers in social media, offering insights into contemporary communicative practices (Brown and Rodriguez, 2024).

Steps in Discourse Analysis

Schneider (2013) offers ten work steps in doing a text-based, qualitative discourse analysis. These are:

1. **Establish the context:** after gathering materials, jot down where the materials come from and how it fits into the big picture.
2. **Explore the production process:** you have already recorded who wrote and

published your sources, but you still need to do a more thorough background check. Try to find additional information on the producer of your source material, as well as their institutional background. For example, if you are analyzing news articles, take a look at the kind of newspaper that the articles are from (Jager, 2004).

3. **Prepare your material for analysis:** in order to analyse the actual text, it is wise to prepare it in a way that will allow you to work with the source on specific details and make precise references later.
4. **Code your material:** when you code data, it means that you are assigning attributes to specific units of analysis, such as paragraphs, sentences, or individual words.
5. **Examine the structure of the text:** Now that you have prepared your materials and have coded the discourse strands, it is time to look at the structural features of the texts. Are there ways in which different discourse strands overlap in the text?
6. **Collect and examine discursive statements:** once you have a good idea of the features of your text, you can map out what “truths” the text establishes on each major topic.
7. **Identify cultural references:** you have already established what the context of your source materials is. Now think about how the context informs the argument. Does your material contain references to other sources, or imply knowledge of another subject matter?
8. **Identify linguistic and rhetorical mechanism:** This step in your analysis is likely going to be the most laborious, but also the most enlightening when it comes to exploring how a discourse works in detail. You will need to identify how the various statements function at the level of language e.g. word groups, grammar features, modalities etc.
9. **Interpret the data:** you now have all the elements of your analysis together, but the

most important question still remains; what does it all mean? In your interpretation, you need to tie all of your results together in order to explain what the discourse is about, and how it works.

10. **Present your findings:** once you have the answer to your original question, it is time to get your results across to your target audience. If you have conducted a good analysis, then you now have a huge amount of notes from which you can build your presentation, paper, or thesis.

Notwithstanding, a discourse analyst should mind pitfalls that may be encountered during any analysis. Aside from being work-intensive, the idea that the analyst needs to follow a certain number of steps to get the results can be misleading. This means that the analysts should always be mindful of the shortcomings in the approach. No amount of discourse analysis can provide adequate evidence on what goes on in people's minds. What can be learnt from a discourse analysis is how specific speakers construct an argument, and how this argument fits into wider social practices (Schneider, 2013).

Functions of Discourse Analysis

Throughout life, man can hardly be separated from the communication events. Thus, it can be said that the most important function of language is a means of communication (Cerita, 2013). Language studies should ideally cover all aspects and components of language in accordance with the fact that there is language usage. In fact, an aspect of language form of discourse is important when compared with other aspects of language. This is because it is important to recognize what meanings are communicated in language and which meaning is derived from the contexts in which the language is used. Discourse analysis cannot be limited to the description of the kind of language that is bound to the purpose or function of which it is designed to use the forms in human affairs. In this paper, discussion about the function of language is centred on the function of language as transactional and interactional.

The transactional function of language: language researchers agree that the main

function of language in society is communication and that language performs many communicative functions. Benneth (1976) asserts that communication involves a speaker seeking either to inform a hearer of something or to ask an obligation of him. Lyons (1977) as cited in Olateju (2004) states that the notion of communication is readily used of feelings, moods and attitudes but that his personal interest lies in the intentional transmission of factual or propositional information. Brown and Yule (1983) refer to language use to convey factual or propositional information as transactional language. The language used in this situation is message oriented. Therefore, it is important that the message be clearly understood by the receiver of the communicated message.

The Interactional Function of Language: In this case, social relationships are often used to be established and maintained. Brown, G. and Yule, G. (1998) observe that the use of language to negotiate role relationships, peer solidarity and the exchange of turns in a conversation is the major concern of the conversational analysts. It is important to note that, at times, speakers in an exchange do not always transmit information. Pirsig (1976) notes that there are conversations that are not intended to go anywhere. For instance, people in a restaurant may suddenly engage in a conversation just because they are served with cold dishes instead of hot ones. The essence of conversations sometimes is just to open up conversations of friendship, partnership or jokes.

The above transactional and interactional functions of language in discourse analysis are based on the understanding that they are the main means by which humans communicate or interact, and thus the vital tools for full social interactions and activities. The various aspects which make conversational analysis a rich area of study are the naturalness of conversations involving transactions, interactions, participations, beyond sentence level analysis, and in dynamic, systemic, rule governed nature of conversations.

Conversation breaks down when there is silence of all parties concerned. Things that suggest silence in conversation include: end of conversation, thinking or rethinking,

communication breakdown, no preferred turn, abuse of felicity conditions, confusion in turn-taking allocation (Olaofe, 2005).

Discourse Analysis in Classroom Situations

The growing interest in the studies of the language interaction in the classroom situation has made many scholars to get involved in the study. Flanders (1965) worked on the teachers' contributions in the classrooms and the consequences of teachers' utterances for students' achievement. The system has been used in many independent studies but has also been criticized for its inconsistencies used in some of the categorizations. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) pointed out that some of the categories were closely related to the linguistic data e.g. asking questions, lecturing, giving directions while others were at a different level of abstraction e.g. accepting feelings, praises, etc. Barnes (1969) made detailed and interesting observations on the kinds of questions teachers ask and how these questions limit learners' thinking abilities and participation in classroom activities. The approach was relevant to classroom discourse but was also limited in scope. Sinclair (1973) introduced a descriptive system which was blown up and used by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) and which was found to be useful for the analysis of language classroom interactions.

Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) tried to examine classroom dialogue and have postulated that a typical exchange in the classroom consists of an initiation by the teacher, followed by the response from the learners.

For examples;

T: Why do you eat all that fruits? (initiation by the teacher. I.)

S: To keep us healthy (response from the student. R.)

T: To keep you healthy, Yes

To keep you healthy (feedback from the teacher. F.)

Why do you want to be healthy?

(Extracted and adapted from

Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975).

Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) stress that the exchange in the classroom has the structure that is, initiation, response and feedback (IRF).

The structure of “learner exchange” is initiation and response (IR); since feedback is expected to come from the teacher not from the learner. With this approach, they succeeded in emphasising the fact that what goes on in the classroom is an interactional process that unfolds itself gradually through turn-taking.

Moreover, Coulthard and Brazil (1981) shed more light on the unit ‘exchange’ in their work on eliciting exchanges. They explain that teachers often ask questions whose answers they know. The learner who is eager to provide an answer to the teacher’s elicitation wants to know if his answer is right or wrong and an absence of feedback in most cases is a clue that the answer is wrong. For examples;

T: Can you think why I changed cat to hut?

S: Cat got two vowels in it.

T: Which are they? What are they?

S: ‘a’ and ‘t’

T: Hm

S: No

T: No

(Adopted from Coulthard and Brazil, 1981).

In the above example, the teacher’s silence made the student to know that his answer was wrong. A teacher has to distinguish between right and wrong learners’ responses. He has some high key options which he could use only when the answers are totally wrong.

Discourse analysis of classroom interactions can also shed light on cross-cultural linguistic patterns that may be leading to communication difficulties. For instance, some speakers may engage in overlap speaking while someone else is taking a turn-at-talk. This discourse behaviour can be interpreted as a signal of engagement and involvement. However, it may be viewed as an interruption and imposition on speakers’ speaking rights. Teachers can use the record-view-transcribe-analyse technique to study cross-cultural interactions in their classrooms, helping students identify different communication strategies and their potential for miscommunication (Douglas, 2001).

Although some variables of language leaning are beyond the control of second language teachers, discourse analysis can be a useful analytic tool for making informed changes in

instructional practices. Mainstream teachers, especially those with second language learners, can also use this technique to study classroom interactions in order to focus on the learning opportunities available to students with limited English proficiency. In fact, discourse analysis can be an integral part of a program of professional development for all teachers that includes classroom-based research, with the overall aim of improving teaching (Johnson, 1995).

Discourse Analysis and Education

Discourse analysis plays a vital role in education. It primarily focuses on most of the learning materials such as text books manuals, instructions, classroom dialogues etc (Van Dijk, T.A. 1981). Discourse is used to assess how the various uses of such texts influence the processes of learning: the acquisition of knowledge, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, abilities, and other cognitive and emotional changes which are the goals of educational institutions (Van Dijk, T.A. 1981). Therefore, the importance of discourse as an interdisciplinary study in education is paramount to both teachers and students including textbook writers, researchers and educational managers.

Olateju (2004), states that students from various disciplines can be provided with a specialization in discourse analysis in relation to their future jobs. Thus, teachers will have to think about the specific expertise, knowledge or insight to teach students that they can profitably apply in various occupations. The job requirements of various future professionals may have to be taken into consideration frequently for academic research work in discourse analysis and future job preparation for the society. A good knowledge of discourse analysis will enable writers of textbooks and educational planners to include structures and contents that can adequately support the acquisition of knowledge in various areas of human endeavours.

Discourse Analysis and Educational Reserachers

For many years, educational reserachers have drawn on key concepts from anthropology, linguistics, linguistic anthropology, sociology

and sociolinguistics to analyse discourse (Warriner, 2008). The different types of discourse analysis utilised by educational reserachers over the years have enhanced our collective understanding of teaching and learning processes, both in and out of school settings, as well as the historical, social or political factors that influence those processes. Drawing on theories and analytic tools from a variety of disciplinary traditions, educational reserachers have examined a range of topics and questions, including how they are appropriate for certain types of research purposes. Topics of discourse analysis may include various types of discourse used in various disciplines including those used in politics, the media, education, science, medicine, law, business, etc.

Discourse analysis is a qualitative research method that investigates the use of language in social contexts. Concerned with the creation of meaning through talks and texts, discourse analysis provides insights into the way language works to help “shape and reproduce social meanings and forms of knowledge” (Tonkiss, 2012). Thus, the reserachers are concerned with how language is used in social and political contexts for ideological purposes and for reproducing and legitimizing power, and therefore go beyond the rhetorical analysis of language. As such, there comes a need to “deconstruct texts” in the spoken and written language and to investigate, and bring to light hidden hierarchies as well as dominations, oppositions, inconsistencies, and contradictions (Creswell, 2007).

Conclusion

In a broad view, discourse analysis is the all-embracing concept encompassing aspects such as text-linguistics, conversational analysis, language use and users in diverse sociolinguistic contexts. It includes elements such as interaction, dialogues and monologue texts in action. The processes involved in discourse in communication are the speaker, source, or initiator of the communication. The producer produces the message, using a channel which may be written, spoken, face to face, distance, visual, not visual but verbal only, and gestures. The message could be meaningful or meaningless. The receiver interprets the message using the available

linguistic or nonlinguistic elements at his disposal. In classroom situation, elements such as initiation, response and feedback are identified as the relevant discourse devices. Essentially, discourse analysis has been an influential frame of thought for conceptualizing context and culture in social interactions. It primarily focuses on the principle that people construct versions of their social world through the instrumentality and functionality of language. Discourses of people are grounded in subject positions so that participants see and interpret the world from and through the strategic position in terms of images, symbols, metaphors, values and socio-cultural concepts available to them within a given discursive environment in which they are positioned.

Language can be used to represent speakers, beliefs, positions and ideas in terms of spoken texts like conversations. Written or oral messages convey meanings if underlying meanings of the words are analysed. Analysis of underlying meanings can assist in interpreting issues, conditions and events in which the educators find themselves. In discourse analysis, using words can direct or assist those in control of education system to make a significant and specific contribution to critical, social or political analysis of the role of language (Mogashoa, 2014).

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