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# Implementing Discourse Analysis for Intermediate and Advanced Language Learners

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Discourse Analysis (DA) comprises the study of language in use, unifying different levels of linguistic description and explanation. Moreover, DA enables an account of language use that is not only strong from a descriptive perspective (linguistics' traditional forte), but one that also has explanatory dimensions, since DA can help to account for the psychological, social, and psycho-social rationales that motivate language choice for communication. DA's cross-disciplinary scope and depth better enable advanced learners and teachers in training to apply competencies at understanding language use to various real world communicative contexts. This article introduces and discusses some of the theoretical and methodological bases of DA. It is hoped that the discussion will inform language teachers and teacher trainers so that they can pass on to their students an enhanced ability to systematically explore communicative language use across a myriad of contexts and social purposes.

Discourse Analysis (DA) has become a core field within linguistics, with a significant applied influence on language teaching (LT). DA has applied value for LT because it can be used to equip our learners with competencies at understanding language use in the various communicative contexts in which they will be expected to operate outside of the classroom. Such competencies are all the more important if the students will someday be language teachers or translators themselves. This article discusses and explains some of the theoretical and methodological bases of DA, so that language teachers and teacher trainers can enable their TEFL and academic trainees to carry out a systematic exploration of how language is used successfully across a myriad of contexts and social purposes.

DA comprises the study of language in use, unifying different levels of linguistic description and explanation (e.g., phonology, lexis, syntax, semantics, etc.). Moreover, DA enables an account of language use that is not only strong from a descriptive perspective (linguistics' traditional forté), but one that also has explanatory dimensions, since a DA account can help to determine the psychological, social, and psycho-social rationales that motivate language choice for communication.

## Why Discourse Analysis?

In EFL classrooms where authentic and quasi-authentic materials are used, students are often confronted with a potentially confusing variety of texts. This can be justified with the pedagogical objective of providing abundant exposure to as many instances as possible of language used in real contexts. It can be argued that such exposure will help students to develop their

comprehension and production skills to ensure success in their academic and professional practices. The pedagogical approach suggested in these pages is based on a conception of language as a social semiotics, that is, a resource used to transmit essential patterns of a culture realized in the texts produced by the members of that culture (Halliday, 1978; Kress, 1985; Martin 1989; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Fowler 1998/1991), so our task as EFL teachers should be to develop in students an attitude that promotes the exploration and discovery of (1) basic text types, (2) the structure of the values linguistically encoded, and (3) their social function.

In light of this, texts should be viewed as laboratories for analysis, with the ultimate aim being to improve the students' overall performance. Emphasized are learner-based theories (see, for example, Oxford, 1990; Nunan, 1991; Wenden, 1991; Dickinson, 1991 ). Such theories generally stress social interaction, critical thinking skills, language awareness and psychological autonomy (see Figure 1 below). Also receiving focus is a process approach that advocates reading-writing connections and the teaching of reading and writing processes together, encouraging their constant interaction, since they are considered to be similar acts of construction and response.

Figure 1  
What Learner-based Theories Tend to Emphasize

- learners' involvement in a collaborative fashion with the teacher and cooperatively among themselves
- a focus on the systematic development of learning skills leading to autonomy
- the use of authentic texts for communication and language learning
- the deconstruction/analysis and construction of texts in creative ways
- the implementation of skill-getting and skill-using tasks

(Oxford, 1990; Nunan, 1991; Wenden, 1991; Dickinson, 1991 *inter alia*)

DA should be broadly approached so that on completion of their course of studies at university level, students as new language professionals (teachers, material writers, etc.) can decide on the appropriateness of the materials available for classroom and professional use. They should know how to incorporate insights and techniques from applied DA so as to be able to select and produce materials relevant to their own specific situations. Specifically within language teaching situations, DA may be of use when assessing the content of a publication for classroom use or when choosing representative texts to present and practice one particular grammatical or conceptual area. As DA covers and relates in an explanatory fashion a vast domain of knowledge within linguistics, it may be used to enhance the future language professional's theoretical and methodological insights by enabling them to focus on how language is used in order to achieve certain communicative aims.

## Conceptual and Theoretical Preliminaries

Since we are talking about texts as representations and artifacts of actual discourse practices, it is necessary to clarify with a brief discussion a set of key concepts that are essential to DA. The first basic distinction must be made between discourse and text. These two terms, though often more or less equated in ELT, must be differentiated stipulatively for the purposes of this discussion. There is a general consensus that both discourse and text are stretches of language beyond the sentence or clause level. A text can be defined as a semantic unit which constitutes

a unified whole. The more general term, discourse, is used to refer to language in use in a context, with the consideration of both the production and reception processes that arise in a particular social setting. DA treats data as the record (i.e. text) of a dynamic process in which language is used as an instrument for communication in a context by a speaker/writer to express meanings and achieve intentions (i.e. discourse). The aim is to describe and explain regularities in the linguistic realizations of people when they communicate those meanings and intentions.

Another useful distinction made in DA is between form and function. The first refers to the isolated grammatical aspect of a particular utterance while the latter describes how the audience interprets it. For example, in the utterance, "It's rather hot in here", there might be a lack of one-to-one correspondence between grammatical form — a statement — and communicative function — a request to open a window. The correct interpretation in this case will depend on a number of factors of a contextual nature. Indeed, the form vs. function dichotomy reveals that we cannot just focus exclusively on form. In both the reception and the production stage, we need to be able to move from propositional meaning to function in order to match the linguistic formulation with the writer's intention. As Cook (1989) cogently puts it, "there are times when making language function effectively is more important than producing grammatically correct sentences" (p. 41).

Yet another fundamental concept is that of context, that is, the environment or the (extra)linguistic circumstances in which a text occurs. An understanding of the situational context facilitates the reception and interpretation of a stretch of language beyond the linguistic forms which are used since it includes analytical categories such as the topic, the participants, the setting, the purpose and the event, as well as the background knowledge and assumptions underlying the communicative event. Each of these notions contributes to a foundation for implementing a discourse approach to reading and writing. In the next section, we will explore the possibilities that DA offers for the linguistic exploration and interpretation of texts in the arena of the EFL classroom at university level.

## The Psycholinguistic-Cognitive Perspective

The preceding section's overview and the approach to teaching DA in this paper are based on a Psycholinguistic-Cognitive perspective based on the work of Barnett (1989). Such an account stresses the cognitive structures and processes involved in reading and comprehension processes, drawing on key terms such as schemata, interactivity, text processing, strategies and metacognitive awareness to explain how successful text reception occurs.

Schemata are theorized to be mental data structures with stereotypical patterns that individuals retrieve from memory and employ while comprehending and producing both spoken and written language. In dealing with the written mode, for example, schema theorists argue that as readers or writers confront situations in which they need to process texts, they evoke past experiences with text content and form to assist their interpretation. For example, if a story starts with "once upon a time," readers will draw from their past experiences with content to conceptualize it as a fairy tale, and from their experiences with form to process the text as a narrative. However, if either the content or the form are too unfamiliar, they may have difficulties in processing and making sense of the discourse.

Interactivity refers to the "dialogue" between a text's author and the reader. Successful interactivity is closely related to the degree to which schemata are shared.

Text processing is the driving element of the pedagogies based on Psycholinguistic-Cognitive views. This term refers to ways of approaching reading texts which attend to the different strategies that should be encouraged to make sure that text, context and reading task

provide maximum support to the foreign language learner's current linguistic and schematic knowledge.

Strategies refers to the development of selective reading and learning tactics. These include but are not limited to, memorizing, taking notes, summarizing and outlining. Successful and effective use of these and other learning strategies and approaches to tasks, in turn, will rely on building up and using metacognitive awareness, which is an ability to think about the particular cognitive procedures activated in order to complete a task.

A successful approach to the teaching of DA will involve activities and exercises which address each of these areas. It will provide students with the means to expand their schematic knowledge and will lead them to better understand, participate in and, when necessary, question the processes and assumptions involved in the interaction between writer and reader. The materials and activities involved will encourage the use of different text processing and learning strategies so that learners employ a multi-faceted approach to texts that will ultimately develop their metacognitive awareness and their ability to critically assess the material they read. The rest of this article presents some ways in which these goals can be accomplished with higher-level EFL students and teachers in training.

## Discourse Analysis: Possibilities for Language Teaching and Learning

DA has become a leading discipline in the field of applied linguistic studies, exerting a significant influence on language teaching. Knowledge of it can certainly be very useful for students, trainees and practising teachers. Discourse analysts look for regularities in patterns and features occurring in stretches of actual language in use, both in the written and spoken modes, so that broad categorizations can be formulated in regards to both the formal and the functional aspects of any given coherent chunk of language. The sorts of questions discourse analysts ask amount to a rationalist, linguistically informed interrogation of a text. The ability to do this type of inquiry can and should be extended to language professionals such as teacher trainers, teachers, and translators. (See Figure 2 for examples of the sorts of questions asked in DA.)

Figure 2  
Rational Inquiry about Text and Discourses:  
What Sort of Questions do Discourse Analysts Ask?

- How can we infer and understand more than people actually say when we "read between the lines?"
- How do writers and lecturers express their meaning in the right "voices" for specific audiences?
- What formal characteristics and assumptions on the part of both the author and reader distinguish, for example, an article in an academic journal from a report of the same research in a magazine for a mass audience?

## Needs Analysis, Course Content, and Instructional Flow

Once an adequate collection of texts has been chosen for intermediate and advanced level students of English (with their academic and future professional needs as the main criteria), a preliminary use of discourse analysis in instruction might consist of gist activities that ask the students to determine subject matter. Then, attention could be focused on the vocabulary used throughout, with particular reference to the author's choice of lexical items, register, use of metaphor and other stylistic devices. In particular, an interesting area to embark on is the analysis of lexical processes in text, including collocation and word reiteration. Depending on the students' level, another possibility is to explore the grammatical links that tie the text together. This analysis will reveal the cohesive elements — reference, ellipsis, substitution, conjunction as well as the discourse markers (Schiffrin, 1987) and the semantic relationships they convey to make the text hang together as a unified whole. Such an analysis can be used create word sets (or semantic fields) which not only highlight target content vocabulary, but can also be used to show how cohesion and coherence are accomplished in the text (see Halliday and Hasan, 1989, for further explanation of how cohesion and coherence are separate but related issues).

Afterwards, pedagogical analysis might turn on some typical syntactic patterns or formal regularities in the linguistic realizations according to the level of proficiency required. Some leading questions include: Are the sentences and structures too complex? Where does the linguistic complexity lie: in the length, the ideas, the information structure within and beyond sentence level? Has the original text been abridged or simplified for teaching purposes? In order to consolidate different linguistic patterns, while analyzing the text, it is interesting to observe both structural and lexical repetition, since these provide conceptual links and a considerable amount of input.

Another important dimension of DA to sensitise students to is related to some more global characteristics that distinguish, for instance, an oral interview from a written report. In spoken discourse, attention should be paid to turn-taking so that the symmetry or asymmetry of the interactional exchange can be understood. Other interesting facets to explore are the ways in which the information is organized and presented to the interlocutor, the use of adjacency pairs and the like. In a written piece, text type is an important analytical category that will help unravel the predominance of one of the canonical discourse types, namely, description, narration, exposition, argumentation and instruction (see Figure 3 ). For example, in a mainly narrative piece — a story, an anecdote or a joke— there are some structural components known as “orientation”, “complication” and “resolution”, with some other optional categories such as “abstract” and “coda” (Labov and Waletzky, 1967). These broad labels constitute the semantic scaffolding of the whole narrative text, which will differ greatly from a descriptive or an argumentative piece.

Figure 3  
Categories of Textual Strategies

- Description (what things are like)
- Narration (retelling of events in a sequence)
- Exposition (non-evaluative presentation of concepts and facts)
- Argumentation (evaluative presentation of points on a topic)
- Instruction (directive or procedural steps)

(Werlich, 1982)

A functional perspective is also quite relevant in DA, since it seeks to make visible the pragmatic use of the text: its communicative function and its contribution to human interaction, the “what-you-want-to-achieve” with a stretch of language, or the “how-to-do-things with words” perspective (Austin, 1976). As texts are variable in nature, their purposes should also be viewed in terms of dominances of a given purpose or contextual focus. For instance, in the language of advertising we are likely to detect the predominance of argumentative discourse with the overall function of persuading the audience to buy the item advertised, though embedded description and narration patterns are likely to be found performing a subsidiary function. This hybridisation is actually of a fairly obvious nature, since texts seldomly appear in a pure state and, therefore, almost never allow for a strict categorization.

## Strategies for Text Comprehension and Understanding Organization and Writer’s Purpose

Effective readers not only understand what they read but also form reasonable ideas about who it was written for and why it was written. They also can make judgements about whether or not the writer’s choice of lexis, style and organization match the genre the writer has chosen. The set of questions below in Figure 4 provide learners with a framework to simultaneously analyse a text and develop their own skills at this important ability. Although simple, they summarize some of the ideas provided throughout this article. These DA tools can help contribute to intermediate students’ EFL training as springboards to the systematic exploration of how language is used to create certain communicative purposes and achieve specific goals. At this level, the emphasis on the deconstruction-construction process turns to a focus on text content and its functional aspects — as well as on its organization or rhetorical disposition. Students should become familiar with some of the most common structural-textual ways of organizing content at the paragraph or discourse level, such as exemplification, illustration, comparison, contrast, definition, causal analysis, and so on.

Since language is not just a set of forms, the surface-level, formal description of standard language or discourse patterns is necessary but not sufficient. We need to explore other linguistic, psychological and social factors that are functional in nature since they allow us to achieve particular objectives with the language. Since meaning-making is as important as form-making, the students’ attention should be geared to a careful and thorough analysis of the lexical choices made by the writer from the multiple possibilities that the linguistic system offers — generic nouns, deictic elements, inclusive and exclusive pronouns, the selection of syntactic forms (nominalization, passivization, topicalization), the organization of the information and the hierarchy established, the use of modality markers, and so on. As the analyses proceed, one after the other, the students’ cognitive development will increase and their insights will in turn enhance their composing processes as they write discourse on topics of their own choice.

## Written Production for Language Development

Students’ writing development can be based on in part on the text-organization parameters already presented, providing ample opportunities for them to explore different formats both for fluency and accuracy practice. Once this initial threshold has been covered, we can move on to deeper analyses of more challenging texts — both from the linguistic and conceptual points of view — so as to familiarize the students with the arsenal of meanings that it is possible to encode through various discursive means.

Figure 4  
Basic Questions to Elicit Analysis of Texts for Comprehension, Organization  
and Production

- What is the text about? [TOPIC]
- What general characteristics does the text have? ( Is it descriptive, narrative, argumentative, instructional? [TYPE]
- Who is the text addressed to? [AUDIENCE]
- What are the main ideas? What are the supporting /subsidiary ideas? [IDEAS-CONTENT]
- How does the text end? What was the purpose of the author when writing it? [PURPOSE]
- What is the main function of the text? (To convince, persuade, inform, present an opinion, give instructions?) [FUNCTION]
- What is the formal aspect of the text? (Does it have the format of an article, an ad, a report, a report?) [FORMAT]
- How many paragraphs does it have? [FORM-STRUCTURE]
- How is the information organized and distributed in the different paragraphs? [ORGANIZATION]
- How are the paragraphs connected? What grammatical links are present? (connectors, pronouns, nouns, verbs) [COHESION]
- Look at one of the paragraphs in detail. How are the different ideas connected? How are the transitions across paragraphs handled. [COHERENCE]
- Are there any groups of words that are semantically related in some way? Are there any semantic fields that can be attributed to the text? [LEXIS]

## One Step Deeper in with Critical Discourse Analysis

There is much more than form and meaning at play in a text, since knowledge about the context, the readers' and writers' roles, and the values of the text-producers' cultures also affect text reception and interpretation. At advanced levels, developing these contextual sociocultural schemata can be the key to successful processing and production of a text that may or may not be appropriate to a particular situation. With this goal in mind, it is best to take a stance in keeping with Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA), the aim of which is to make more visible the ideological loading and the relations of power that underlie discourse (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 258). From this perspective, then, material should be selected according to its potential for generating a critical attitude in the students — that is, the text as a trigger to stimulate critical thinking — such as texts dealing with issues related to sex stereotypes, racism, immigrant policies, ethnic prejudice, power conflicts, discriminatory practices, and so on.

To illustrate cultural bias in all its media manifestations, we recommend the use of texts from all forms of the mass media: newspapers, magazines, broadcast radio and television, and the Internet. Using a set of materials lumped together as a unit on a particular leading topic is a common and useful practice. A broad selection of texts and materials can be used to show how the same topic is dealt with in a variety of text types and from a number of different points of view. The necessary variety can usually be found in headlines, articles, interviews, reports, editorials, advertisements and cartoons which, at their points of original consumption, were meant to arouse and stimulate reflection and debate. Especially with our advanced students,

we should capitalize on the fact that their command of grammar is consolidated and that their metalanguage is rich and developed, so our task is to guide them to go beyond the propositional content and work out ideological readings from a critical perspective.

For a start, the set of questions below (see Figure 5) should serve as a stepping stone to enhance reflection and stimulate an initial, basic approach to the text. Similar procedures for critical reading have been outlined by Kress (1985) and Wallace (1992). These guidelines can be explored in depth to reinforce and consolidate reading and organizational strategies. At the same time, they can help the learners get acquainted with the culture that has influenced the production of the text in question.

Figure 5  
Basic questions for Critical Discourse Analysis

- Who writes / says X? [AUTHOR'S ROLE]
- Who does (s)he write / say it to? [AUDIENCE]
- What does (s)he say? [TOPIC]
- Why does (s)he say so? [PURPOSE]
- How does (s)he say it? [LINGUISTIC CHOICE]

This preliminary analysis should then give way to a detailed examination of the linguistic choices made during text-production and how these choices reflect beliefs and values either assumed to be shared with the reader or presented to challenge his / her positionings (Wallace, 1992). The number of analytical categories will vary according to our aims and purposes as we may look at different levels or dimensions of discourse. The analysis is now not limited to genres and structure: it aims at a broader social, cognitive and sometimes political interpretation and explanation. Following van Dijk (1999), presented below in Figure 6 is a list of some of the most relevant aspects to consider.

Figure 6  
'Surface' Structures in the Formulation of Meaning

Morphological level (word inflection, derivation, formation):

- Use of neologisms

Lexical and lexico-semantic levels:

- Lexical choice and variation (e.g. *guerillas* vs. *terrorists* vs. *freedom fighters*)
- Use of lexicalized metaphors

Syntactical level:

- Agency (person or thing performing action, use of active vs. passive voice, etc.)
- Nominalization (forming of nouns from other parts of speech)
- Topicalization (English is typically a subject-prominent level, but subject-predicate does not always coincide with topic-comment in information)
- Word order (English is relatively uninflected, with word order playing an important part in grammaticality)
- Ambiguity
- Impersonalization vs. subjectivity
- Passivization (see also 'agency' above)

Let us look at an example of how these levels interact and influence the emerging discourse. In the case of a newspaper report, for example, a reporter might witness an event and then be faced with the choice of referring to it as a “demonstration” (or a “protest”), a “rally”, a “riot”, a “street battle”, “war in the streets”, a “confrontation”, and so on. Later on, as (s)he writes his report in whole sentences, (s)he needs to make linguistic formulations and refer to the actions, the people involved, the effect of the actions, the place where it happened and so on. (S)he might choose “demonstrators confront police” or “police confront demonstrators”; “rioters attack police” or “police attack rioters”; “rioters are attacked by police” or “police are attacked by rioters”; “police disperse rioters” or “riot disperses”. Each of these choices has important discursive implications as to the role allocated to the different “characters” or “agents” in the event reported and certainly throw light on the text producer’s staging and perspectivization.

The domain of semantics offers a complex and rich set of properties that are relevant for a critical approach. Mood and modality reflect the writer’s own desires, needs and points of view. Mitigation — e.g. diminutives, markers such as “sort of”, “more or less”, “it seems to me” — and mitigation’s counterpart, intensification — expressions such as “indeed”, “for sure” — are both also indicative of the text-producer’s perspective and social positioning. The analysis of local and global coherence will throw light on the semantic structure of the text allowing the process of inference of implications — understood as semantic relations between (sets of) propositions — to discover the author’s positioning.

Van Dijk (1999) uses the term “disclaimers” to refer to the semantic moves deployed in discourse about “Others”. Disclaimers function within the combined overall strategies of positive self-presentation and negative presentation of “Others” and “Otherness”, and they express the frequent ambiguity and contradictions between people’s general norms and values and their present attitudes and opinions. Some examples include the following selection: “I have nothing against X, but ... (apparent denial)”; “I am sorry, but ... (apparent apology)”; “I understand their problems, but ... (apparent empathy)”; “I don’t know much, but ... (apparent ignorance)”. Attention should also be drawn to instances of intertextual relationships and the use of hedging and fuzzy terms instead of more or less ‘precise’ words. The summary of categories below (see Figure 7) may lead the students in their analysis.

**Figure 7**  
**Sentence and Discourse Meaning**

- Use of mood, modality, mitigation and intensification
- Local coherence
- Logical relations between propositions (e.g. cause, condition, consequence)
- Functional relations between propositions (e.g. generalization, example, opposition)
- Global coherence (macrostructures)
- Implications and presuppositions
- Perspective and point of view
- Intertextuality

## The Rhetorical Dimension

At the level of rhetoric — another dimension of CDA — we can gear our students’ attention to the use of such complex devices as metaphor, irony, understatement, exaggeration, direct and indirect speech, among many other figures of style.

Due to the potentially argumentative nature of texts to be used at this stage, another interesting element to consider is the use of persuasive discourse with the purpose of motivating a change in the receiver's set of beliefs and values. Our students have to be assisted to go through complex texts which contain these rhetorical devices if they are to access the information contained in them and take a critical stance toward the arguments presented. A primary focus on the linguistic procedures in the construction of a text makes it possible to reach an understanding of its contextual and functional aspects.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have explored different "levels" or "dimensions" of analysis in Discourse Analysis — morphology, syntax, semantics, text organization and rhetoric. The list of suggested categories and activities to explore them has not been exhaustive. This is because the intention here has been to bring the importance and the potential of DA and CDA into focus, particularly in the context of university education, the environment for the development of critical thinking *par excellence*.

DA is an approach to the description, understanding and interpretation of texts that entails many different analytical dimensions. This paper has only presented the tip of the iceberg, since the theory and method implied in this discipline of linguistics offer many interesting aspects that would require much more space to discuss. Finding regularities and patterns in texts is a matter of interpretations made on the basis of the incomplete and ambiguous clues and signals provided by the text producer. For this reason, in DA there is not just one single right answer: it is always possible to analyze a given stretch of language in more than one way.

In the reading and writing of every text, there is a place for individual interpretations, purposes and voices, and we should encourage our students to experiment within and outside textual boundaries and conventions to help them not only comprehend, but to intelligently evaluate and negotiate the texts and contexts in which they operate. By developing a rich understanding of texts through frequent review and reflection using DA and CDA techniques, we can assist students in the development of practices that will prove highly useful in their personal and professional lives.

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