

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN AN ESP CONTEXT: A SHIFT FROM A SENTENCE TO AN UTTERANCE

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Abstract

In the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the emphasis is on the communicative aspects of language and its linguistic properties. In the teaching process, the principles of grammar are not enough. Teachers should be involved in the analysis of discourse and its implications to language teaching materials. The aim is to teach learners how to handle discourse in English. In this paper, we will try to demonstrate the ability of the students in an ESP context to shift from the level of a sentence to the level of an utterance. The transfer of a set of sentences into discourse is a good example for the development of the knowledge of the grammatical structures to the communicative use of the language.

Keywords: ESP, Discourse, Utterance, Usage, Use.

1. INTRODUCTION

Analysists are more and more concerned with how language means. The general principle in register analysis is to find out 'what factors determine what linguistic features' in the words of (Halliday, 1978). Today, many researchers are working on genuine texts in order to find out about the linguistic features that characterize them in various contexts. In the context of ESP, it is very important to shift from the sentence level to the utterance one in order to convey meaning in specific contexts.

2. ESP: DEFINITION

We would expect the ESP community to have a clear idea about what ESP means. This may depend on how people interpret the meaning of ESP. It may be described as simply being the teaching of English for any purpose that could be specified. Others are more precise, describing it as the teaching of English used in Academic studies or in the teaching of English for Vocational or Professional Purposes. As a rule, ESP is defined to absolute and variable characteristics. The definition of Dudley-Evans is influenced by that of Strevens (1988). For Strevens, ESP is in contrast with General English and has included more variable characteristics.

According to these views, ESP is not only concerned with a specific discipline, but should be seen as an 'Approach' to teaching or an 'attitude of mind' as stated by Dudley-Evans (1998). Similarly, Hutchinson and Waters (1987), state that:

'ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to the content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning.'
Hutchinson & Waters (1987:47)

Another concept in ESP is that of variety. The term variety refers to registers of language use, such as English in Banking, in Medicine, in Academic settings, and everyday conversations. The idea that different varieties of English are based on a common set of grammatical and other linguistic characteristics (Bloor & Bloor, 1986) is crucial in ESP.

For Basturkem (2006), all language is for a specific purpose. Basic language is what is present in all varieties of English. All languages are learnt in one context or another. Basturkem (2006) considers also that

there is no General English or English for Specific Purposes.

According to Bloor (1986:130), '*teaching a variety of English can start at any level*'. He furthermore notes that:

'All language learning is acquired from one variety or another, even if it is classroom English variety. A language learner is likely to acquire the language from one variety as from another, but the use of language, being geared to situation and participants, is learned in appropriate contexts'. This view supports a theory of language use as the basis of language acquisition theory.

Bloor & Bloor (1986:28)

It is obvious that learners can acquire a language in different disciplines (ESP), but they have to relate usage to use. Grammar in this case can be a life-boat for learners with deficiencies at the level of context. The scientific knowledge is very important, and mastery of language is not enough. It is argued that both structures and how they are used to negotiate meaning in different situations are relevant. The only difference that lies between general English and ESP is in practice and not in theory.

3. GRAMMAR AND USE

Learners need more than knowledge of linguistic forms which correspond to communicative functions; that is to say, the ability to actualize language in context. They must have certain ability to understand linguistic structures and lexis. Knowing a language involves a grammatical knowledge and how it functions too. The grammatical knowledge has to be used in real contexts in order to achieve meaning. We may define it as the ability to put knowledge in action. Thus, we are concerned with knowing a set of grammatical elements and lexis, and how they are used appropriately to create meaning. Learners are not only concerned with what they know, but also with what to do with language. Are we involved with competence or performance in ESP?

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) state the following:

'We need to make a distinction between the performance repertoire of the target situation and the competence required to cope with it. The competence providing, as it does, the generative basis for further learning is the proper concern of ESP.'

The underlying forms of language are much more important than performance, in the sense that knowing the rules of language may help the learner to build correct grammatical sentences. Grammar in this case may be an emergency for them in the comprehension of unfamiliar passages; however, in ESP performance is crucial too, for learners need to know what to do with language such as to cope with different situations.

4. COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

One shall take the term communicative competence as the ability to use the language system appropriately in any context. According to Chomsky (1965), '*Competence is the perfect knowledge of an ideal speaker-listener of the language in a homogeneous speech community*'. According to Chomsky, knowledge is competence; as opposed to '*the actual use of language in concrete situations*' which he named performance. Competence is the language system, and performance is the actual behaviour. It seems that even if performance is projected from competence, it does not correspond to it because what we know cannot be equated with what we do.

Knowing a language does not imply that we possess language. For Chomsky, performance is '*the residual category of second phenomena*.' Therefore, performance is influenced by external factors, so it is not possible to rely on it; whereas, competence which represents grammar is a valid construct in the words of Widdowson (1996): thus, competence is a useful principle for language study. I am competent means that I know my grammar; that is to say the form of my language, but how about the functions that these forms may take in communication. It is relevant to consider that much work has been done to reflect on the study of *usage* neglecting *use*.

Hymes (1972) points out that Chomsky's competence/performance model does not provide an explicit place for socio-cultural features. He also argues that Chomsky's notion of performance seems confused between actual performance and its underlying rules. Hymes suggests the following:

- Whether something is formally possible.
- Whether something is feasible
- Whether something is appropriate.
- Whether something is actually performed.

Widdowson (1978), on the other hand, considers that *usage* is knowledge of the system of the language, and *use* is the realization of the language system as a meaningful communicative behaviour. For Widdowson (1978) an utterance has a communicative value; an utterance with a well-formed grammatical structure may not have a value for communication in a given context. Moreover, Hymes (1972) focuses on the ability of use for pedagogical purposes as opposed to Chomsky who develops linguistic competence for the study of the language system.

Such a theory of Communicative Competence has an impact on Foreign Language Teaching, more particularly on the Communicative Approach, and on the selection and the grading of the items to be taught. In fact, we cannot consider that Chomsky's view is irrelevant since the study of language is essential. Linguistic competence generated by Chomsky is concerned with the description of language; whereas, Communicative Competence is generated for educational purposes; in fact, both are complementary. Even if Hymes opposed Chomsky's view, he believes that '*There are rules of use without which the rules of grammar are useless*'. (Hymes, 1971, p.278)

5. TEXT AND CONTEXT

Text is defined as '*the product of the process of discourse; whereas, context is all the aspect of the world*'. (Shiffrin, 1994). An utterance takes place in context; however, a sentence takes place in a text. The interaction that lies between text and context is discourse. This will lead us to discuss discourse and its relevance to ESP. It is crucial to understand that form should not be dissociated from context in order to achieve agreed meaning. The text has to do with the formal systematic knowledge; however, discourse has to do with language actualized as behavior.

In fact, there are situational factors that may affect context or make it change such as medium of communication (face to face, telephone, computer, codes and genres). Consider the following example: a group of general practitioners is discussing a disease, but one of them shifts from a topic to another. How can this practitioner show that he/she is about to move from this discussion to another? How may the others notice this change? Perhaps the only way is through his/her tone or the pitch of voice. In this case, it is evident to refer to contextualization of clues according to Gumperz (1982).

One has to rely on certain clues to arrive at agreed meaning such as knowledge of the world, the language code and in the previous example, to the system of language and the convention of use. These norms may contribute in the creation of discourse which is the topic of the discussion. The creation of discourse is established through a combination of a set of sentences and this may be possible through the use of certain components such as items of connections (the linking words), coherence and cohesion.

6. AN APPROACH TO THE SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSE

Discourse in Science and Technology has been used to explain how meaning is created in a text, and how sentences are combined. The process which is used to produce a text is called rhetoric which becomes synonymous to discourse. Louis Trimble (1985) points out the following '*Rhetoric is a term used to refer to organization and content*'

In this context, the rhetorical functions include: definitions, classifications, descriptions and instructions. A scientific text is characterized by the rhetorical devices cited above which make it different from other genres. The task of the teacher is to show his/her students how sentences are combined in a text, and how they are

used to create meaning. Sentences are connected by items such as connectors that make the text coherent and cohesive and help in its interpretation.

In fact, discourse analysis is a matter of how sentences are used to generate meaning. Consider the followings:

- Prevalence of obesity increases with age
- The very old are not often obese
- Most of their fat contemporaries have already died
- There is a well-marked familiar tendency

These sentences presented in isolation are not enough to create meaning. The teacher may ask the students to build a coherent passage in order to see their ability to create discourse. These sentences may be combined through the use of various items, for example:

'Prevalence of obesity increases with age, but the very old are not obese because most of their fat contemporaries have already died; in addition, there is a well marked familiar tendency.'

We are concerned here with what makes a text coherent; for instance, factors that we have presented elsewhere such as cohesive devices, coherence, expectations and background knowledge of the text producer and the text receiver. In discourse analysis we are more concerned with the combination of words into sentences and in judgments about whether these sentences are socially acceptable

7. DISCOURSE IN ESP

From a formalist point of view, discourse is defined as '*language above the sentence, or above the clause*' (Stubbs, 1983), and from a functionalist point of view, it is defined as '*the study of any aspect of language use.*' (Brown & Yule, 1983). This is related to purpose and function; language is then used to achieve a purpose and to perform a function (Widdowson, 1990).

The scientists and non-scientists construct their sentences using the same rules (grammatical rules), but sometimes there are types of sentences that are largely used in the scientific discourse such as the use of the conditional and the passive voice in order to avoid subjectivity. Consider the following:

- Bronchodilators were introduced twenty-five years ago
- Parenteral nutrition has been used for short and intermediate term nutritional support of children hospitalized with debilitating diseases
- If you don't wash a wound, germs may enter through the broken skin
- If you hold the two sides of the cut together, you will control bleeding

These types of sentences are used in medical English simply because general practitioners are concerned with instructions, warnings and recommendations; in addition, there are highly technical words that characterize the scientific text such as antigen, antihistamine, byssinosis and encephalopathy. A medical text may contain a high proportion of verbs such as to increase, to reduce, to freeze and to moisturize.

Years ago, English for Science and Technology (EST) focused on language at the sentence level. As ESP became involved with the emerging field of discourse; ESP shifted attention to the level above the sentence. This work has been achieved by several authors such as Widdowson, Selinker and Trimble. The problem within pedagogy is that learners encounter problems with English use and not with knowledge of the system of the language. In fact, we are concerned with how sentences are used in the performance of various communicative acts. Usually, sentences are combined in discourse to produce meaning. The main objective is to identify the rhetorical patterns of texts. Consider the following passage:

'Bladder cancer is diagnosed by examination of the bladder wall with cystoscope, a slender tube fitted with lens and light that can be inserted into the tract through the urethra. Surgery, alone or in combination with other treatment is used. Preoperative chemotherapy, alone or with radiation before cystectomy (bladder removal), has improved some treatment results.'

'*Human Biology*' (1998:438)

As a rule, scientific texts show a high proportion of certain syntactic features and a low proportion of others that may be useful for the identification of scientific English corpora. Moreover, in this passage the initial sentence functions as a generalization that describes the fact that bladder cancer is diagnosed by the examination of the bladder wall. Generally speaking, these rhetorical devices (definitions, generalizations) are used in a medical text as they are typically related to truly scientific data. Therefore, an EST paragraph is a type of discourse.

8. CONCLUSION

To understand a medical text, for example, the process depends on grammatical knowledge; that is to say, to recognize the main points of grammar and to identify the specific terminology, yet, this is not enough. In fact, one must be able to decode the deep meaning of the sentences. This may be possible through the use of several techniques of comprehension such as to rely on the schematic knowledge of the readers. It is crucial to bear in mind that learners of ESP must relate the grammatical knowledge and the scientific knowledge in order to communicate effectively; in other words, to be able to shift from a sentence (*usage*) to the utterance (*use*) in order to generate meaning.

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