

The Ability of Discourse Type Recognition At The University Level

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the obstacles the students may encounter in recognizing different types of discourse and the consequences these obstacles may have on discourse processing (comprehension). A summary of different types of discourse would be far beyond the theoretical limits of this short study, besides, the number of discourse types is so large and diverse that it needs a whole series of studies to realize every possible type of discourse. So, adopting a specific system of discourse classification is a must in terms of the scope of the current paper. For a system to be feasible, it should involve discourse characteristics that can be related to types of discourse. The classificatory model adopted in this study is based on Cook's definition and classification of discourse types since it serves the aim of the study. In order to achieve the aim of the study a test is carried out to (50) students in the Department of English/ College of Education/ University of Al- Qadissiyyah. After analyzing the results of the test, it was evident that students did face difficulty in recognizing the discourse types they were supposed to identify, and this led to a significant indication of misunderstanding and incomprehension of the situation and the physical form of the discourse type they are faced with.

1. Introduction

Language teaching has mostly concentrated on English structure, and while this remains the basis of foreign language knowledge, discourse theory, in its practical relevance to language teaching, draws attention to the ways by which learners can put this knowledge into action and achieve successful communication. The attention to

discourse does not mean sacrificing the emphasis on *pronunciation*, *grammar*, and *vocabulary*. These are essential in communication and discourse is realized through them. As Cook (1990:13) says "Discourse and formal skills are interdependent and must be developed together."

Thus, it is urgent to emphasize the necessity of *discourse skills* in the foreign language teaching process.

Lec. May Ali Abdul-Ameer The Ability of Discourse Type Recognition At The University Level

However it is beyond the scope of this paper to find out the significance of all discourse skills in the teaching process. So the current paper will be concerned only with one specific discourse skill called *Recognition of Discourse Type*. The reason behind this focus is the hypothesis this paper works under which is : the recognition of *Discourse Type* is supposed to be a crucial factor in the discourse processing and production.

However, the researcher confines herself to investigate the validity of this hypothesis in so far as it is concerned with *Discourse Processing* (comprehension) putting aside *Discourse Production* to a forthcoming study. It is worth keeping in mind that the number of *discourse types* is so large and the realization of such types is so diverse that the representation of the full rang of *Discourse types* is rather not feasible in such a short paper. So it is inescapable to acknowledge that each researcher may need to workout or adopt a specific classificatory model of discourse type, in a way that this model conforms to the aim of the study the researcher is carrying out. Therefore, the model of classification used in the present study is based on Cook's definition and classification of *Discourse Type* because it serves the aim of the study that is : exploring the problems students may be having with *Discourse Type Recognition* and the obstacles this may pose for reading comprehension.

2. Cook's Classificatory Model of *Discourse Type*

Reviewing the literature, the researcher has found that the term *Discourse type* has been used in different ways, and that many attempts have been made to design a classificatory system, within which discourse characteristics can be related to certain types of discourse. (see Renkema ,2004, and Werlich ,1982).

In an earlier work, Stegar et al (1974: 34-41) classified discourse types according to discourse situation. Based on sociological analysis, six discourse types were distinguished :

1. Presentation
- 2.Message
3. Report
- 4.Publication
- 5.Conversation
- 6.Interview

Each one of these types constitutes a distinctive feature for a particular discourse situation. Thus, a doctor-patient talk situation is characterized by a discourse type called *interview* (ibid:37). Nevertheless, Stegar's model stressed the sociological factors in a discourse situation at the expense of the linguistic features of the discourse type itself.

Using a similar framework as proposed by Stegar et al (1974), Cook (1990:95) classifies the term *discourse type* in a more simplified and feasible way. Pushing the term a little further, Cook (ibid.) uses discourse type to mean "something that we all use everyday in order to orient ourselves towards the communication in which we are involved." It seems that language abounds with names for *discourse types*, and in English there is a good number of quite ordinary words used to signify such types (ibid.), for example:

Lec. May Ali Abdul-Ameer The Ability of Discourse Type Recognition At The University Level

| | | | |
|--------------|---------------|----------|-----------|
| recipe | joke | report | label |
| letter | advertisement | anecdote | massage |
| chat | seminar | poem | note |
| song | novel | notice | biography |
| speech | story | sign | essay |
| lecture | manual | article | warrant |
| ticket | menu | cheque | will |
| conversation | sermon | telegram | row |

There is no need, according to Cook (1996: 57), to introduce any technical term for discourse type, nor should "we hesitate to name them to our students for fear of burdening them with jargon. They are metalanguage, but one which exists in everyday language and is useful for the foreign student as the native speaker." (ibid) Nevertheless, what triggers the question of this paper is the increased emphasis the researchers put on the importance of the term in pedagogical planning and hence on pedagogical skills: *speaking, listening, reading, writing*. Stating that language teachers need to alert students to different discourse types, Moore (2001: 61) stresses the strategic role of the students' ability to deal with the interaction they are involved in by classifying it, and by being able to make use of that classification.

But the idea of teaching students different terms for discourse type raises the issue of whether these terms taught are appropriate or familiar to the students' culture (Cook, 1990: 98). A foreign language teacher should take into consideration when teaching and encouraging students to use discourse

type "whether these types are specific to a particular culture or not" (ibid.). One should never forget that teaching a language is also teaching a culture.

Admitting the importance of this fact, we should, from a pedagogical point of view, not take for granted when we teach terms referring to discourse type that each term has an exact equivalence in the students' cultural atmosphere (Pattison, 2007: 73), and any teacher with a sufficient knowledge of the cultural studies knows that even in relatively close cultures there may be important differences one can not avoid (ibid.). Cook (1990: 98) also mentions that in multicultural classrooms, where the teacher is from a culture different from that of the student, there can be overt discussion of what students understand by different terms and it is rather expected that the students might find this very enjoying and motivating. Whereas in monocultural classrooms, where the students and the teacher are from one culture, the situation is even harder and must rely upon the teacher's understanding of the language and culture he or she is teaching (ibid:99).

Lec. May Ali Abdul-Ameer The Ability of Discourse Type Recognition At The University Level

3. Recognition of Discourse Type:

It seems that the recognition of discourse type employs every aspect of the relation that holds between language and context (Rivers, 2008: 38). Discourse type recognition itself, as an example of language use, can not be in dissociation from the natural conditions of language use (Widdowson, 2011:19). Context is one of these conditions, it involves all "the aspects of extra-linguistic reality that are taken to be relevant to communication" (ibid: 128).

Cook (1990:102) realizes well the significance of context in the process of recognition and it should be indicated when students process discourse. But, what distinguishes Cook's classification of discourse types, in terms of context, is the detailed features that he indicated as being attributed to context (1996: 67). Thus, all or any of the following features may be brought into consideration when students process discourse or are asked to produce it:

| <u>Feature</u> | <u>Example</u> |
|----------------------|--|
| 1.sender\ receiver | (child, friend, employer, host....) |
| 2.function | (to obtain information, to attract attention,) |
| 3.situation | (at a party, on the factory floor, in a Shop,.....) |
| 4.physical form | (folded piece of paper in an envelope, large metal board, . . .) |
| 5.title | (Air Ioniser Instruction) |
| 6.overt introduction | (Listen I want to tell you a joke, This is a story about . . .) |
| 7.pre-sequence | (once upon a time, Dear Kim,...) |
| 8.internal structure | (abstract + introduction + main text + booklist + notes) |
| 9.cohesion | (high frequency of logical conjunctions: therefore, thus, . . .) |
| 10.grammar | (high frequency of subordinate clauses) |
| 11.vocabulary | (archaisms, loan words) |
| 12.pronunciation | (accent, volume) |
| 13.graphology | (hand writing, print, type) |

Every one of these features contributes a lot to the recognition of

Recognition At The University Level

discourse type in a way that keeps the description of such types under a rigorous control (ibid:72). Discourse type may be recognized by a combination of the features mentioned above. Though most researchers, and Cook is one of them, have tried to balance the significance of each feature with the other ones, the researcher of this study underscores the exceptional role played by *situation* and *physical form* in recognizing discourse types. These two features are so crucial in the description of any discourse type, they constitute the essence of every type of discourse because every type should have both a situation and a physical form (see Van Dijk, 2003: 108-110). There is no doubt that problems for reproducing such features in the limited environment of the classroom are obvious, but wherever possible the *situation* and the *physical form* should be generated or described for the students in a way that reminds them of the role such features play in recognizing discourse types (Cook, 1990:102). There are many textbooks that do realize this very fact about the importance of these two features, so that they present letters, menus, maps, newspaper cuttings and also include pictures of cans, bottles, packets with legible labels, video covers, road signs, telex print-out and so on (ibid.).

This process of reproducing particular features has great interest and value, and of great motivating appeal to students. Yet it is desirable to isolate the discourse form from its physical realization and situation in order to make students concentrate

upon other identifying features as what the researcher did in the test of this study. Students may then be asked in what physical form or situation they would expect to find a given piece of discourse.

4. The test:

The informants that have been chosen as a representative sample of the study are fourth year students/department of English/ College of Education/ University of Al-Qadisiya. It should be noted that this choice is made on the basis that the students have covered through their three years of study in the English Department a rather satisfactory number of subjects in reading comprehension, conversation, essay writing, and linguistics. Moreover they have just finished part of their course in linguistics related to discourse analysis, semantics and pragmatics. Thus, the students are supposed to be competent in dealing with various types of English discourse, besides, using and comprehending English.

Considering the taxonomy of discourse types proposed by Cook, six discourse types are chosen: *recipe*, *sign*, *advertisement*, *label*, *newspaper*, and *biography*. It is hard to cover all the types involved in Cook's model and the researcher thinks that the types mentioned above are more related to everyday life than the other ones. Besides, the English learner needs to identify them straightaway because of their highly distinctive vocabulary.

Lec. May Ali Abdul-Ameer The Ability of Discourse Type Recognition At The University Level

Thus, in thinking of these types the researcher was curious to see whether the students at the fourth stage in English Department are capable of recognizing each type. Therefore, a group of (50) students were asked to identify each type after reading the passages carefully. The Students were also asked to point out in what *physical form* and *situation* they expect to find each type. In case the students may recognize the type, but do not know the English word for that type, they can only state what they think the physical form or situation might be.

It should be noted that the researcher tried to explain, in a couple of lectures, what the term *discourse type* means to the students before conducting the test to make sure that they would have a rather good realization of the term as it is used in the test. Besides, they have been introduced with the various types suggested in Cook's model.

The two tables below show the score percentages of the students' performance to both their ability in *discourse type recognition* and their ability in identifying *the physical form* and *situation* for each type:

Table (1)

Score percentages of students performance in discourse type recognition.

| Discourse type | Correct | | Wrong | | Total | |
|----------------|---------|------------|-------|------------|-------|------------|
| | Count | Percentage | Count | Percentage | Count | Percentage |
| Recipe | 4 | 8% | 46 | 92% | 50 | 100% |
| Sign | 10 | 20% | 40 | 80% | 50 | 100% |
| Advertisement | 26 | 52% | 24 | 48% | 50 | 100% |
| Label | 14 | 28% | 36 | 72% | 50 | 100% |
| Biography | 28 | 56% | 22 | 44% | 50 | 100% |
| News article | 42 | 84% | 8 | 16% | 50 | 100% |

Table (2)

Score percentages of students performance in identifying the *physical form* and *situation* for each discourse type

| Discourse type | Physical Form | | | | Situation | | | | Total | |
|----------------|---------------|-------|---------|-------|-----------|-------|---------|-------|-------|------------|
| | Correct | Wrong | Correct | Wrong | Correct | Wrong | Correct | Wrong | Count | Percentage |
| Recipe | 0 | 0% | 50 | 100% | 6 | 12% | 44 | 88% | 50 | 100% |
| Sign | 9 | 18% | 41 | 82% | 9 | 18% | 41 | 82% | 50 | 100% |
| Advertisement | 24 | 48% | 26 | 52% | 24 | 48% | 26 | 52% | 50 | 100% |
| Label | 25 | 50% | 25 | 50% | 25 | 50% | 25 | 50% | 50 | 100% |
| Biography | 30 | 60% | 20 | 40% | 30 | 60% | 20 | 40% | 50 | 100% |
| News article | 42 | 84% | 8 | 16% | 42 | 84% | 8 | 16% | 50 | 100% |

5. Data Analysis:

The score percentages shown in table (1) indicate that *recipe* is the most difficult kind of discourse type to be recognized by the students . Out of (50), only (8%) have recognized it and only (12%) of them managed to recognize its situation as shown in table (2). This means that the students are not familiar with this type of discourse and this led to a serious failure in assigning the situation usually associated with it. The second discourse type that the students hardly recognized is *sign*. Only (20%) of them were able to recognize it and (18%) of them recognized its physical form and situation. The discourse type (*label*), as shown in table (1), came third in the students' ability of recognition: (28%) of the students were able to identify its name ,while the score percentages increases to (50%) in table (2) when they were asked to point out its physical form and situation. This indicates that students have managed to recognize the type but did not know the English word for it. The score percentages of students' ability in recognizing the two discourse types (*advertisement* and *biography*) indicate that most students (52%, and 56%) have successfully recognized them and also have successfully identified their physical form and situation (48%, 60%) as shown in table (2). When coming to recognize the last type (*newspaper article*) the students did not face much difficulty, (84%) were able to recognize its type and its physical form and situation. This makes it clear that the students have enough experience of this

type of discourse in their own native language and culture.

What is of a particular interest for the researcher is the fact that the data in Table (2) demonstrate two very important points: first, the only plausible explanation of the *equal* score percentages in recognizing the physical form and situation is the close interrelation between them. Thus, once a student can recognize one of them, he can tell about the other. This interesting connection proved crucial in the students' ability to recognize discourse types. Second, there is a parallel relation between the students' performance in *discourse type recognition* and their performance in identifying the *physical form and situation* for each discourse type. It is not a coincidence that *recipe* has hold relatively the minimum percentages in the two tables above: (8%, and 12%), and it is not a coincidence that *news article* has hold relatively the maximum percentages: (84 %, and 84 %).

Nevertheless, there is only one exception, or might be called a deviation, to the close relation that holds between physical form and situation: Table (2) shows a total failure in identifying the physical form for *recipe* (0 %), whereas, only (12 %) out of (50) students have succeeded in identifying its situation. It seems that the cultural specificity of certain discourse types, such as *recipe*, raises doubts even about the mutual prediction of physical form and situation. In the case of *recipe*, several students were able to figure out the situation, and their prediction might be

Lec. May Ali Abdul-Ameer The Ability of Discourse Type Recognition At The University Level

based upon the vocabulary used in the *recipe*: ". . .peel . . . chop . . . fruit . . . sugar. . . Bake . . . mixture . . .etc." However, they failed to predict its physical form since it has no relation whatever with the content of the discourse type. It is a highly culture-specific feature, and it is evident that the students lack the cultural knowledge they need to identify the unfamiliar physical form of *recipe* as a discourse type.

6. Conclusions

One can not deny the importance of formal skills in foreign language teaching and learning, yet it is through discourse that these skills are put into action and thus achieve communication. Discourse type recognition, as one skill in discourse processing , is an inescapable first step in the establishment of most , if not any, successful communication. The recognition of discourse type is essential for effective comprehension. Once the students have identified the discourse type, they can orient themselves towards the communication they are involved in.

The output of the test carried out in this paper suggests three findings:

1. Most students face difficulty in recognizing the types of discourse that they are not familiar with. Although some students did manage to recognize the types but they did not identify the physical form or situation . Whereas some of them only stated the physical form and situation of the type because of not knowing the

English word which refers to the type in question. This suggests that teachers need to alert students to different kinds of discourse and encourage students to use them. Teachers also, must show the students the importance of the features mentioned previously in the recognition of discourse type, and wherever possible some of the features especially the physical form and situation should be reproduced, or at least described in the classroom.

2. The score percentages of the test shown in table (1) and (2) show that the easiest discourse type recognized by the students is *newspaper article*. This might be ascribed to the fact that the students have a rather good experience in this discourse type in their own culture, especially when this type takes on a content of a political issue.
3. The low percentages of *recipe recognition* urge the teachers to focus their teaching on discourse types which might be unfamiliar in the students' native language but familiar in the cultural atmosphere of the language they are trying to have a command in. This, in turn, will enrich the students' repertoire with new discourse types that will help them in accommodating the culture of the foreign language.

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Appendix

The Test

Identify the discourse types of the following and mention the reason behind your identification pointing out what you think to be the physical form and situation for each type.

Note: *in case you do not know the English word for the discourse type indicate only what you think the physical form and situation might be.*

1. first you peel and chop the fruit. Then sprinkle it with sugar and toss with raisins. Bake the mixture for one hour. You may serve the pudding with vanilla ice-cream.
2. Sorry for the delay. Ministry of Transport.
3. Ernest Miller Hemingway was born in 1899 at Oak Park, a highly respectable suburb of Chicago, where his father, a keen sportsman, a doctor. He was the second of the six children. Although energetic and successful in the all school activities, Ernest twice ran away from home before joining the *Kansas City Star* as a cub reporter in 1917. Next year he volunteered as an ambulance driver in the Italian front and was badly wounded. Returning to America he began to write features for the *Toronto Star*

Lec. May Ali Abdul-Ameer The Ability of Discourse Type Recognition At The University Level

Weekly in 1919 and was married in 1921.

4. For external use only- Keep out of the reach of children. Avoid contact with lips and eyes.
5. Love to travel? Love to learn? Take the Smithsonian on your next trip.
6. BAGHDAD- Interim Iraqi Prime Minister signed a long –awaited amnesty law Saturday that would pardon Iraqis who have played minor roles in the country's 15-month-long insurgency, but not those guilty of killing. The amnesty had been expected to be a key element in the government's efforts to coax Iraqis away from the anti- U.S. campaign, but the more limited offer is unlikely to dampen the violence.

بنطاق البحث الحالي . ولكي يكون النسق معقولاً ، لا بد له من أن يشتمل على خصائص الخطاب التي يمكن ربطها بأنواع الخطاب. ويرتكز النموذج التصنيفي الذي تتبناه هذه الدراسة على تصنيف « كوك » وتعريفه لأنواع الخطاب ، إذ إنه يخدم هدف هذه الدراسة . ولتحقيق هدف الدراسة أُجري اختبار لخمسين طالباً في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية / كلية التربية / جامعة القادسية . وبعد تحليل نتائج الاختبار، كان من الواضح أن الطلاب قد واجهوا فعلاً صعوبة في تمييز أنواع الخطاب التي كان يُفترض بهم تعرفها ، وقد أدى ذلك إلى دلالة مهمة تتعلق بسوء الفهم وغياب الإدراك للمكان والشكل المادي لنوع الخطاب الذي وُوجهوا به.

الخلاصة

يحاول هذا البحث استكشاف العوائق التي يواجهها الطلبة في تمييز الأنواع المختلفة للخطاب و التبعات التي قد تنجم عن هذه العوائق في معالجة الخطاب (في الاستيعاب) . سيكون وضع خلاصة للأنواع المختلفة من الخطاب أمراً بعيداً عن تناول الحدود النظرية لهذه الدراسة القصيرة ، وعلاوةً على ذلك ، أن عدد الأنواع الخطابية كبير ومتشعب إلى الحد الذي يحتاج معه إلى سلسلة كاملة من الدراسات لإدراك كل نوع ممكن من الخطاب . وبالتالي ، يُعد تبني نسق محدد يتعلق بتصنيف الخطاب أمراً ضرورياً بقدر تعلق الأمر