

**Bridging the Gap between Form and Meaning through
Discourse Based Approach**

Dr. Muhammedali Chalikandy, Former Deputy Head, Department
of English, Al Buraimi University College, Oman

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Abstract

Second language learners of English need both meaning and form of the language in order to achieve their communicative goals. However, the current English Language Teaching (ELT) methods focus on either form or meaning. Traditional methods stress form over meaning while modern methods focus on meaning rather than form. Therefore, there is a need for new ways to bridge the existing gap between form and meaning. This paper argues that Discourse Based Approach can bridge the prevailing gap in English language teaching by presenting language items in natural context either through written discourse or spoken discourse since the approach integrates language structures with their meaning, functions and usages in real life context semantically and pragmatically. The paper claims that Discourse Based Approach can improve learners' language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, it enhances learners' knowledge of language systems and builds vocabulary; furthermore, it develops learners' communicative competence.

Keywords: form meaning discourse authentic communicative competence

Introduction

Popular English language classroom practices make learners either accurate user or fluent user. For example, methods like audiolingual stresses learners' accuracy while Communicative Language Teaching focuses on their fluency. Second language learners need both meaning and form of the language in order to interact communicatively in new contexts, to function in interpersonal relations and to deal with unfamiliar linguistic contexts. Traditional methods focus on form thinking that the learners can use bits and pieces of language like sounds and words to communicate by combining them into sentence whereas Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach focuses on content or message. How can we make learners both accurate and fluent user of English? This paper discusses how Discourse Based Approach makes learners not only fluent users but also accurate users of English by emphasizing both form and meaning.

Discourse

The noun *discourse* comes from the Latin *discursus* to mean "an argument" (Vocabulary, n. d.) and the term has got different meaning. The term discourse refers to anything beyond the sentence. Discourse is larger than a sentence (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary, n. d.). It's as any piece of extended language (beyond one sentence), written or spoken, that has unity and meaning and purpose" (Teaching English, n. d.).Linguistically, discourse is a piece of "communication in speech or writing" (Cambridge Advanced Learners Electronic Dictionary, 2005). It is "the use of language in speech and writing in order to produce meaning; language that is studied, usually in order to see how the different parts of a text are connected" (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2010, p. 432).Discourse is natural spoken or written language in context, especially when complete texts are

being considered (Collins Online Dictionary, n. d.). “Discourse is a language use relative to social, political and cultural formation-it is language reflecting social order but also language shaping social order, and shaping individuals interaction with society ” (Jaworsky and Coupland, 2006, p.3). According to Fasold (1990) the study of discourse is the study of language use (p. 65). Celce-Murcia & Olshtain (2000) define discourse as:

An instance of spoken or written language that has describable internal relationships of form and meaning that relate coherently to an external communicative function or purpose and a given audience/interlocutor. Furthermore, the external function or purpose can only be determined if one takes into account the context and participants (i.e., all the relevant situational, social, and cultural factors) in which the piece of discourse occurs (p. 4).

Discourse refers to connected speech or writing. It “involves studying longer (spoken and written) texts but, above all, it involves examining the relationship between a text and the situation in which it occurs” (McCarthy, 2001, p. 48).

Traditional view of language considers that a language is composed of small parts like sounds, words, phrases, clauses and sentences. Therefore, each component should be studied as an independent item in isolation. Nonetheless, no component is independent and can be understood without considering its context. Each component plays significant role in determining its discourse and in turn discourse decides its structure. Ariel (2009) argues that “discourse depends on grammar, which in turn depends on discourse” (p. 5). In fact a language is more than a set of well-defined structures since the language users choose appropriate discourse to express their ideas, views, opinions, experiences and emotions by which they achieve their communicative and social goals.

Discourse Based Approach

Traditional grammar focused on sentence based grammar. English grammar is taught at sentence-level and not at discourse level (Celce-Murcia & Yoo, 2014). Traditional approaches to grammar teaching emphasize forms in which grammatical rules are taught in de-contextualized individual sentences. In other words, sentences are studied in isolation and the stress is on identifying them as well formed or ill formed sentences. According to traditional method, learning English means learning its grammar (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Hughes and McCarthy (1998) point out that traditional grammar takes neither longer text nor real world texts. However, recently the focus is on discourse-based grammar. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2005) argue that “ While learning another language students need to develop discourse skill in that language; to function in new contexts and in new interpersonal relations; and to attend linguistic, cultural, and social factors that may be completely unfamiliar” (p.729). Moreover, “language teaching today draws on the findings of corpus linguistics, discourse analysis and conversation analysis and acknowledges interrelationships between grammatical and lexical knowledge” (Richards, 2015, p. 262). According to Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2005):

Discourse- based approach allows for target language engagement that focuses on meaning and real communication. Such real communication can, of course, be carried out in speech or in writing with a variety of communicative goals. Learners of different age group and different levels of language proficiency should have, according to such an approach, many opportunities for natural exposure to the target during the course of study, as well as many opportunities to use the language for meaningful purposes (pp. 734-735).

According to Celce- Murcia (1991) Discourse Based Approach originated from the study of learner's communicative needs and organizing corpus material around such needs. Therefore, the stress of this approach is on discourse not the sentence. It focuses on both semantics and pragmatics of the language as Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2005) argue that "A discourse- based approach leads to grammatical knowledge that is well embedded in pragmatics and context" (p. 735). It is an English language teaching approach in which language items, systems and skills are taught at discourse level and pragmatics and context play a key role in determining the meaning and function. In other words, forms, functions, meanings and usages, contexts and participants are integrated coherently and cohesively in discourse based approach. Discourse Based Approach incorporates literal or direct meaning, explicit and implicit meaning of linguistic items and contextual and indirect meaning, in addition to cultural and users' personal meaning.

Components of Discourse Based Approach

There are four main components of Discourse Based Approach: discourse analysis, pragmatics, background knowledge and context. Discourses Analysis is an approach or technique that analysis language in terms of linguistic, social and cultural contexts. According to Harris (1952) it is a method which examines connected speech and writing in which language beyond sentence and the relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic behavior are analyzed. Discourse Based Approach is the analysis of spoken or written texts that contain more than one sentence, including their social context (Dictionary.cambridge, n. d.). According to Paltridge (2012), "*Discourse analysis* examines patterns of language across texts and considers the relationship between language and the social and cultural contexts in which it is used...the ways that the use of language presents different views of

the world and different understanding” (p. 2). Cook (1989) defines Discourses Analysis as “stretches of language perceived to be meaningful, unified and purposive” (p. 156). When the real life communicative interactions are used, the participants’ age, status, roles and other personal characteristics needed to be analyzed in order to understand the intended meaning of the discourses since discourse analysis “examines how the use of language is influenced by relationships between participants as well as the effects the use of language has upon social identities and relations” (Paltridge, 2012, p. 2). Discourse analysis provides deeper understanding of the discourse.

Pragmatics deals with the interpretation of the message and infers meaning by analyzing literal meaning, contexts, and the speakers. Pragmatics is “the study of how language is affected by the situation in which it is used, of how language is used to get things or perform actions, and of how words can express things that are different from what they appear to mean” (Dictionary.cambridge, n. d.). Pragmatics studies “how both literal and non-literal aspects of communicated linguistics meaning are determined by principles that refer to the physical or social context ” (Britannica, 2023). Semantics and pragmatics are the two branches of the linguistic study of meaning. Semantics is the study of word meaning and sentence meaning taken away from context of use while pragmatics is the study of meaning in context and it studies the speakers intended meaning (Griffiths, 2006). Semantics deals with the literal meaning whereas pragmatics is about contextual meaning. In short, it is about the interaction of semantic knowledge with our knowledge of the world, taking into account of context of use. **Pragmatics studies language in use i.e. in real communication.**

Background knowledge is the “information that is essential to understanding a situation or problem” (Vocabulary, n. d.). It is the

basic knowledge or information that a person is required to have on a topic or an issue in order to understand it or to deal with it.

Context refers to the setting of a linguistic item or a discourse. It indicates “those aspects of the circumstance of actual language use which are taken as relevant to meaning” (Widdowson, 2000, p.126). Cook (1999) defined context is a kind of knowledge which can be used in a broad and narrow sense. In the narrow sense context means the knowledge or factors that contribute to understand the text but fall outside the text while in the broad sense it is the knowledge and factors that are inside the text under consideration. “Context is the physical environment in which a word is used” (Yule, 2000, p.128). In short, context is the situation, environment, circumstances or a setting in which a discourse occurs.

Context can be linguistic, situational, social or cultural contexts. Cook (1999) called linguistic context as “co-text” (p. 24). Linguistic context refers to the relationship between the words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs which enable the users to infer the meaning as they give textual clues. Situational context refers to the environment, time and place in which the discourse occurs, and the relationship between the participants. Since language is a social phenomenon and closely connected with the social structure and values, education, participants’ roles, their status, gender, class and age affect the language that they use. Cultural context refers to the culture, customs and background of a discourse. According to Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) context is the non-linguistic and non-textual factors and features that involve both spoken and written communicative interaction. A discourse is time bound and happens in a particular context that involves people who create their own meaning.

Bridging the Gap between Form and Meaning

Learners will learn grammar better when it is taught in a meaningful context rather than as a discrete item in isolation. Discourse Based Approach is centered on this concept. Discourse-Based Approach integrates grammar into discourse in second language learning. Since grammatical items are organized into discourse using authentic materials, the learners analyze the forms, interpret and infer their meaning. Furthermore, both linguistic and nonlinguistic (social and cultural) clues that are available in authentic discourse help the students to connect forms with their meaning, functions and usages. In other words, Discourse-based approach provides learners with contextual clues that are crucial in determining the functions, uses and meanings of the structures. Collins (2007) claims that discourse-based grammar teaching will enable learners to have “form-meaning relationships” (p. 301).

Grammar is connected to meaning and discourse in Discourse Based Approach. If students understand the relationship between grammar, meaning and discourse, this will help them choose the contextually appropriate grammar. Discourse based teaching requires authentic text in which native speakers’ grammar is integrated naturally. Consequently, native speakers’ grammar usages are acquired in contexts. To put it another way, the learners internalize native speakers’ usage in natural context since Discourse Based Approach uses authentic material.

Discourse Based Approach is an effective alternative traditional de-contextualized discrete grammar teaching. When grammar is integrated in meaningful context, grammar learning will be more learner centered, learner friendly and effective. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) argues that discourse-based grammar teaching provides learners with meaning and real communication, integrates forms within Communicative Language Teaching and enables learners to be competent users of a language.

Discourse Based Approach increases students' grammatical knowledge and grammatical competence as they understand the application of grammatical items in written and spoken discourse. Discourse based grammar increases learners' linguistic competence since language items are presented through a discourse cohesively and coherently in texts. It promotes grammatical knowledge and skills.

According to Hughes and McCarthy (1998) discourse based grammar connects form, function and contexts. The learners understand how language is used in real life contexts. Therefore, grammar teaching has become efficient and effective. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2005) includes not only linguistic function of language, but also the socio-cultural and pragmatic functions in discourse based approach. It enables the learners to explore different meaning conveyed through variety of forms.

In conclusion, Discourse Based Approach bridges the gap between grammatical forms and their meaning since it focuses on form, function and meaning of language items in contexts and enhances learners understanding the relation between grammar and pragmatics.

Importance of Discourse Based Approach in English Language Classrooms

In Discourse Based Approach language items are taught in natural contexts; therefore, the learners understand their uses, functions and meaning which develop the learners' communicative competence. Discourse-based teaching uses authentic texts both written and spoken discourse. For example, an extract from a history book can be used to teach past tense, time and meaning effectively. A newspaper article can be used to teach different kinds of prepositions, connectors, and different kinds of tenses. Discourse

Based Approach is important in English language classrooms because:

- It involves the learners in the process of learning English cognitively and contextually;
- It engages and involves the learners in the process of language learning;
- The learners are no longer passive listeners who learn rules monotonously as they are engaged in analyzing language items in contexts, identifying, interpreting and inferring the speakers or senders intended meaning;
- The learners are active participant as they process language by analyzing the text through both bottom-up and top-down discourse processing;
- Discourse Based Approach helps the learners to become competent user of English;
- It teaches meaning and communication in both spoken and written contexts;
- Discourse Based Approach enhances learners' language skills since this approach uses both spoken and written discourse-based activities. For instance, Farrokhi et al., (2018) conducted a quasi-experimental study and found that discourse-based grammar teaching improved the students writing skills.
- The learners internalize writing mechanics like punctuations as they occur in discourse, structure of different genre of writing and writing styles.
- They understand the structure of paragraph and an essay;
- It improves students reading skills considerably as they engaged in authentic material and build their vocabulary by encountering new vocabulary in context;

- Learners listening skills are improved since this approach provide opportunities to listen to expressions, phrasal verbs, and grammatical structures used in real-life context;
- The learners improve their oral skills by acquiring stress, rhythm and intonation in contexts which accelerate their overall accent.
- Discourse Based Approach integrates language skills and systems in context;
- Grammar teaching becomes natural, real life and communicative;
- It makes English language classroom learner centered and learning centered;
- Students can learn grammatical rules in context and
- Grammar learning becomes more effective since learning materials are arranged into discourse types.

Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2005) place “adequate emphasis on language form and its relation to communicative purposes” and they claim that their approach “enhances pragmatic understanding of the relevant social and cultural contexts within which communication takes place” (p.735). Discourse Based Approach develops learners’ communicative competence since the approach focuses on discourse and communication. Above all, the learners become independent learners.

Conclusion

Unlike traditional methods, Discourse Based Approach stresses the importance of context, speakers and prior knowledge in comprehending both spoken and written discourse and favours authentic language. Moreover, in these approaches, meaning precedes form. This approach permits both type of processing: top-down and bottom-up for making sense of discourse as well.

Discourse Based Approach develops learners' grammatical and linguistic skills, language skills and communicative competence.

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