

# The Importance of Discourse Analysis in Teaching Oral English

Nguyen Thi Hong Hai, M.Econ., M.Ed.

**For true communicative competence, students need more than grammar and vocabulary.**

In learning a language, it is important to understand the grammar and vocabulary used in constructing sentences, or in other words, the rules for making meaning from words. However, besides sentence-level knowledge, we also need to be able to interpret the meanings of utterances in the contexts in which they are made. At this point, Paltridge emphasizes (p. 3):

*There is still, nonetheless, more ground that needs to be covered in order to provide a complete description of language use, as well as to help us understand why we make particular language choices and what we mean by them. This is what discourse analysis is able to do for us.*

In working with third-year EFL students at Hanoi Foreign Trade University for many years, I have found that they often have trouble giving responses to simple utterances or even offering proper greetings in certain situations. Why so? The answer is that learners' communicative competence in the target language is still limited. This is due to restricted opportunities for interacting with native speakers and little exposure to a variety of genres, speech events, and discourse types that occur outside the classroom. It may also be due in part to teachers' neglect of the importance of proper English use—they tend to focus on knowing *about* English. It clearly makes sense to raise students' awareness of the importance of discourse competence when communicating in the target language. With an understanding of the characteristics of discourse analysis, language teachers can use discourse analytical techniques to help students investigate their patterns of interaction so as to improve their communicative competence. The purpose of this article is to discuss key concepts of discourse analysis and recommend feasible solutions to help Vietnamese students successfully communicate in English.

## Background

Detailed information on discourse analysis can be found in Nunan. He discusses at length the central concepts involved and provides various samples of spoken and written texts as well as templates of activities to help readers understand and explore these concepts in use. McCarthy looks at discourse analysis with a focus on the discourse structures of spoken and written texts, providing models of analysis to be used in both speech and writing.

In the first chapter of *Making Sense of Discourse Analysis* (Paltridge), the discourse analysis approach is situated in the literature, then in following chapters he discusses in detail the purposes, patterns, and systems of written and spoken language in the contexts of their uses.

With regard to the application of discourse analysis in teaching oral English, Burns, as well as Burns and Joyce, present a comprehensive rationale and sound procedure for conducting language teaching from a discourse perspective. Paltridge offers a list of templates of activities that can be adapted to language classrooms with a view to building learners' awareness of discourse elements in different genres. These are excellent resources that can help learners use authentic language in context.

## Overview of Discourse Analysis

### *Definition of "Discourse"*

"Discourse" has been defined in different ways by different writers. It is "a continuous stretch of language rather than a sentence, often constituting a coherent unit, such as a sermon, argument, joke or narrative" (Crystal, cited in Nunan, p. 5). Functional definitions see discourse as language in use (McCarthy). The first

definition is not exact, since in some cases a piece of discourse consists of only one or two words, such as “Stop” or “No parking.” Similarly, the second definition is such a general description that it can sometimes be misleading.

A more satisfying definition of “discourse” can be found in *Making Sense of Discourse Analysis* (McCarthy and Carter, cited in Paltridge, p. 4):

*A view of language which takes into account the fact that linguistic patterns exist across stretches of texts. These patterns of language extend beyond the words, clauses and sentences which have been the traditional concern of much language teaching. The view of language we take is one which focuses, where appropriate, on complete spoken and written texts and on the social and cultural contexts in which such language operates.*

### **Various Approaches to Studying Written and Spoken Discourse**

As indicated above, discourse analysis is the analysis of language beyond the sentence. This contrasts with types of analysis which are mainly concerned with grammar, word meanings, sounds, and rules for making meanings. Discourse analysts are interested in studying larger chunks of language as they flow together. Their concern is how to interpret the relationship of grammatical forms of utterances to given interlocutors and meanings expressed through discourse. For example, as a grammatical rule the interrogative form is often used to elicit information, but it can also be used to make requests, offers, and suggestions, or to express expectations of speakers, for example:

*“Do you remember?” (question)*

*“Would you mind if I brought a colleague with me?” (request)*

*“Would you like me to arrange a demonstration?” (offer)*

Or again, an imperative is generally used to make commands. However, we can use a variety of other moods to perform this function:

*“Type this letter!” (imperative)*

*“I want you to type this letter for me.” (declarative)*

*“Would you type this letter, please?” (interrogative)*

Thus, clauses of the same mood type can perform different functions in different contexts. Likewise, clauses of different mood types can do the same function.

Discourse analysis also “examines how stretches of language become meaningful and unified for their users” (Cook, cited in Paltridge, p. 4). Given an appropriate context, one or two words can form a meaningful text. Alternatively, a piece of discourse consisting of many words, as in a short story, can also form a “meaningful whole” as it conveys a coherent message.

Discourse analysis includes the study of both spoken interactions and written texts. It identifies linguistic features that characterize different genres as social and cultural factors that support our understanding. A discourse analysis of written texts may cover the study of topic development and cohesion across sentences. McCarthy notes that the use of various cohesive ties to link all the propositions in a written text creates cohesion in that text. This point is also well made and discussed in detail by Paltridge, who emphasizes that the distinctive features of written discourse are the cohesive ties which contribute to the unity of a piece of discourse through hanging sentences together as well as relating them to one another.

There are various approaches to discourse analysis of spoken interaction, with contributions coming from conversation analysis, with its account of discourse structure, turn-taking mechanisms, opening and closing sequences, and discourse markers; speech act theory, with its identification of different forces of utterances; and pragmatics, with its contextual interpretations of the meanings of utterances. These approaches have been widely discussed by McCarthy, Burns and Joyce, and Paltridge.

Spoken interactions are classified by Burns and Joyce into transactional and interactional. Transactional conversations, in which people wish to obtain information about goods and services, tend to be formal, structured, and predictable, while interactional conversations often involve talks in casual, informal, and spontaneous contexts in which the main purpose is to establish social contacts. At this point, Sinclair and Coulthard’s model—known as the Birmingham model—is a useful tool for analyzing patterns of interaction (cited in McCarthy). It states that each transaction consists of exchanges which in turn cover different moves. These moves can be sequences of ask / answer / comment or initiate / respond / follow-up, and each move can be expressed by a speech act. However, since McCarthy argues that “casual conversations are less easy to predict than

transactional interactions” because speakers tend to change topics or put new content into it while talking, the Birmingham model is not always applicable.

Conversation is an enterprise in which one person speaks and another listens. Analysis of turn-taking examines a conversation to determine when one person’s turn is over and the next person’s begins. Questions are asked such as, “How do people signal their turn exchanges?”, “Do speakers of different cultures have different attitudes toward the management of turn-taking?”, and “Should people begin or end conversations in different ways?” Examples of answers to the first question include intonation, pausing, phrasing, gestures, and facial expressions. With the third question, for instance, “How are you?” is a common greeting in Australia, but in Vietnam “Where are you going?” and “Have you eaten?” are more likely to be used. These phenomena are what discourse analysts study.

While cohesion is one aspect of language use considered within discourse analysis of written texts, discourse markers are associated with the study of spoken texts. Discourse markers refer to terms such as “well,” “oh,” “but,” and “and”, which break speech into parts and show the relations between them. Discourse analysts are also interested in studying these types of language use.

Paltridge suggests (p. 16):

*[S]entences, then, very often have both a literal meaning and an illocutionary meaning; that is, a meaning which goes beyond what you, in a literal sense, have said. A speech act is an utterance which has both a literal meaning and a particular illocutionary force.*

This implies that with exactly the same utterance we can interpret it in different ways with different audiences in different situations. Discourse analysts, therefore, take into account the relationship between interlocutors, the purpose of an interaction, and the setting, as well as their general knowledge of the world, to support their understandings of utterances. At this point, discourse analysis and pragmatics interact and overlap. A number of aspects of discourse analysis are also objects of study for pragmatics (the study of what

people mean by what they say). For example, the utterance, “I’m tired,” can convey different meanings in particular contexts, although the literal meaning of the words is the description of a state. For example, it might mean:

*“I don’t want to stay overtime.” (secretary to boss when asked to do extra work)*

*“Carry me!” (two-year-old child walking with his mother)*

*“Don’t disturb me.” (man to woman as they go to bed)*

## Discourse Analysis and the Teaching of Oral English

As an EFL teacher, I think that EFL students’ knowledge of phonology, vocabulary, and grammatical patterns is not sufficient for them to communicate effectively in the target language. Lack of knowledge of discourse and social-cultural patterns may lead them to communication difficulties and misunderstandings. One problem for English language learners is limited experience with a variety of interactive practices in the target language. Therefore, one of the goals of language teaching is to expose learners to different kinds of discourse patterns in different interactions. This, in part, can happen through the introduction of authentic materials for teaching speaking. Maximizing opportunities for student participation in classroom activities is also important for attaining this goal.

Materials designed for the teaching of speaking should be authentic spoken texts in the form of recordings and transcripts which include different discourse patterns. Scripted dialogues can be useful and appropriate for elementary-level students, but often fail to illustrate typical features of authentic spoken discourse. Students really need to encounter spoken interactions reflecting natural, spontaneous dialogues between native speakers from the intermediate stages of language learning onwards. Authentic materials help them not only hear what spoken discourse sounds like, but also prepare them for unexpected real-life speaking situations.

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Having perceived the significance of discourse competence in communication, teachers also need to understand and design their teaching strategies from a discourse analysis perspective. Teaching speaking from a discourse perspective is described by Burns as “taking a pedagogical shift from regarding the constituent forms of language as primary to thinking about language from the perspective of larger textual units” (p. 107). This approach should be taken into consideration by language teachers because it enables us to help our students understand that speaking is an active process of negotiating meaning—not merely using grammatically correct sentences but also producing functionally appropriate and effective utterances in different contexts. This point has been further discussed by Burns and Joyce, and Celce-Muria and Olshtain. These writers agree that teaching speaking from a discourse perspective requires teachers to include the study of discourse in their classrooms, that is, to make students themselves become discourse analysts.

As mentioned above, social interactions fall into transactional and interactional exchanges, and students should have opportunities to explore language use in both. For example, they can study speech acts in a service encounter, turn-taking patterns in a conversation between friends, opening and closing sequences in telephone conversations, or other aspects of speech events. For this purpose, I have found the templates of activities recommended by Paltridge a valuable resource for teaching. We can teach students to manage conversations, keep a conversation going, be cross-culturally aware during a conversation, and “fill in the blanks” with formulaic expressions—these classroom tasks can be quite effective in building an awareness of overall discourse.

Although interactional conversations may include all sorts of “complications,” they are somewhat predictable and can be classified into different genres. To help students be aware of the discourse structures of spoken texts, teachers should provide them with different samples of spoken genres to help them understand how texts are staged. Since different genres require different choices of language patterns in terms of grammatical forms, lexical items, discourse markers, and formulaic expressions, students should understand these differences and be given many chances to practice. For further consolidation, they can be given exercises which explicitly deal with specific language patterns for giving examples, comments, observations, or opinions.

For EFL students in particular, opportunities to interact with native speakers are often unavailable. Authentic

materials thus play an extremely important role. For my students, I often combine listening and speaking in a sequence like this:

- First, I have students listen to a tape or watch a video of two native speakers having a conversation.
- Then I have them identify and analyze specific discourse features individually, in pairs, or in groups. Questions are asked such as, “How many stages are covered in the conversation?”, “What are the language patterns?”, and “Are there any formulaic expressions or discourse markers?”
- At the same time, I have students focus on language variations and social-cultural diversity, since otherwise they tend to rely on mother tongue habits.
- Consolidation can be done in the form of a role-play or simulation in which students act out a conversation or are given a similar one on which they must improvise.

Besides conversation genres, students should have opportunities to engage in monologues as well. A picture narration task is very useful for them to practice producing speech patterns in a narrative format. A description of a flow chart—such as how milk is produced or how cotton is made into clothing—can help them study discourse structures of the “how to” or procedure genre.

## Conclusion

We have discussed the notion of discourse analysis and its significance in teaching oral English especially. Students need to obtain knowledge of language as discourse in order to effectively communicate in the target language. In part, this can happen as a result of exposure to authentic spoken texts, but it will also be necessary for teachers to analyze and explain aspects of discourse analysis and to develop exercises which deal with typical discourse structures. Burns points out (p. 114):

*A methodological approach drawing on authentic discourse would also place learners in a less passive roles, giving them greater independence to analyse and critique ways in which speakers may be socially constructed and positioned within spoken exchanges.*

This statement is a useful guideline for all language teachers in the teaching of oral English. ■

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Nguyen Thi Hong Hai (M.Econ., International Economic Relations, Hanoi Foreign Trade University; M.Ed., TESOL, University of Sydney) teaches English at Hanoi Foreign Trade University. She has earned a Certificate in the Teaching of English for Business and Technology from RELC in Singapore. She also contributed the Lesson File, "Socio-Drama With Business Telephone Skills," to this issue of *Teacher's Edition*.



## Ideas on the Go

# Practicing Question-and-Answer Skills

**Manuel V. Bringas, Jr., M.A.**

**Goal:** *Three activities to sharpen students' verbal skills in asking and answering questions.*

### Activity #1

This might be done to review the content of a dialogue or a reading passage, or simply to practice the skill of asking and answering questions.

- Divide the class into two teams. Each team confers and writes a set number of questions in a given time period.
- The teacher collects the questions and gives each team one point for each perfect question, but does not say which ones are right or wrong.
- One team asks the other team one of the questions. A representative from the answering team, without the help of the team, responds. If the answer is correct, his team gets one point.
- The same representative then says if the question is grammatically perfect or if there is a problem with it. If he gets this correct, his team gets another point. If he fixes a problem, his team gets yet another point.
- Groups take turns asking and answering, with each group rotating its representatives.

### Activity #2

- Divide the class into two teams. One representative from each team goes to the blackboard.

- The teacher gives a vocabulary word. (Group representatives rotate with each new word.)
- The first team to use the word correctly in a sentence gets one point. Only the representative can write the sentence, but the team can help.
- A sentence such as, "What does (target word) mean?" does not count!

### Activity #3

- Divide the class into two teams.
- Two representatives from the same team stand. One will be making a question, and the other will be answering it.
- The other team gives a vocabulary word. (If the teacher cannot understand the word, the first team gets a point.)
- The first representative must use the vocabulary word correctly in a sentence without the help of teammates. The second representative must answer the question. A point is awarded for each.
- A sentence such as, "What does (target word) mean?" does not count!
- Rotate team representatives.

*Manuel V. Bringas, Jr. (M.A., TESOL, Azusa Pacific University) has taught English since 1998 at Vietnam Maritime University in Haiphong, and previously taught at the Beijing Institute of Technology in China.*