

LEARNING WRITING THROUGH DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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In this paper we try to analyze some genres of written discourse to unveil the common patterns of academic writing for English students in advance university courses. The disappearance of the term *Philology* in the studies of languages has made scholars and teachers shift the methodology of teaching languages. In this new scenario, the instrumental part of each language comes to the foreground of teaching and learning. Within this state of affairs, the competence of writing is one of the most important elements for students to master, as they have to prove their competence and skills in an academic environment. By comparing a variety of samples, students learn to improve their writing and adapt their knowledge to different social and academic purposes. The goal is to present an approach in which proficient L2 learners become more independent, learning to research, analyze and assess the texts of a certain culture and apply their knowledge of discourse to their own writing.

Key words: learning writing, discourse analysis, text assessment, text selection, syllabus

We will depart from a discourse-based view of languages that will help us look into contextualized, meaningful language fragments. Discourse will contribute to the analysis of language and the construction of complete text within specific contexts. This, obviously, involves exploring the relationships between linguistic patterns of complete texts and the social contexts in which they function. The discourse-based view also gives priority to an interactive approach that underlines the dynamic nature of linguistics. It should be noted that language learning is an interactive process in which learning how to produce and understand texts is essential.

In order to design a method that will help us guide our students through the complex but fascinating world of language learning, I would propose a three-staged system following the paradigm of McCarthy and Carter (1994):

- 1) Classification of the world of discourse: speech and writing.
- 2) Analysing and exploiting patterns: the developing of discourse.
- 3) Designing the discourse syllabus

1. CLASSIFICATION OF THE WORLD OF DISCOURSE: SPEECH AND WRITING

It is of great help to distinguish between the two major categories of discourse: writing and speech, as they present recognizable different characteristics. But it is important to note that varieties in language can not be categorized in monolithic terms, as language is malleable and dynamic and a rigid classification would hinder an adequate command of the language students are learning. What we derive from a closer look at the differences between writing and speaking is a complex of relationships between language forms and contexts of use. In our selection of sample text we have to present a wide variety of texts that ranged from excerpts that show clearly the difference between spoken and written to fragments that show more creativity and an added difficulty for classification and labelling as those are texts that intentionally deviate from the norm in order to emphasize originality, creativity and an individual command of the use of a certain language, twisting its grammatical structures and its lexical items to make them mean what the author wants them to aim at or even to act on the speakers to make them feel and act in a specific way (Austin 1962).

The processes of speaking and writing differ mainly in that writing is not simply speech written down on paper or printed, therefore we can't assume that people know how to write as they know how to read. The process of speaking, except in cases of speech impairment, is naturally acquired, but the process of writing requires systematic instruction and practice. While in spoken language there are clear regional variations, written language is more restricted and follows a standardised form of grammar, structure, organization, and vocabulary. When communicating orally, speakers use body language, pitch, rhythm and stress to convey meaning, but written communication has to rely on wording (Halliday 1978) to express meaning. Speakers also use pause and intonation to interact in a specific moment with the rest of the participants in the communicative act, but writers need to use punctuation. While the act of speaking is spontaneous and unplanned, most writing is well organized, edited and revised before exposure. Speech is frequently repetitive, writing progresses logically with fewer digressions and explanations. From this derives the fact that speech uses simple sentences, while writing uses

complex sentences and connecting words that help readers understand the meaning following a logical pattern. And last, speakers can gauge the attitudes of the audience by their reaction, while writers have to measure their audience and consider how the message on a specific topic should be conveyed.

Example of two excerpts on the same topic: Discuss why a fifth of American youths can't locate the United States on a world map.

Spoken: *"I personally believe that U.S. Americans are unable to do so because, uh, some people out there in our nation don't have maps and, uh, I believe that our, uh, education like such as in, uh, South Africa, and uh, the Iraq and everywhere like such as, and I believe that they should, uh, our education over here in the U.S., uh, should help South Africa and should help the Asian countries, so we will be able to build up our future for our children"*. (An answer by Miss Teen South Carolina in the American beauty pageant, 2007).

Written: *"American recent polls show, to our national embarrassment, that a fifth of American young people are not able to locate the United States on a world map. The main reason for this is a defective education system based on information rather than on knowledge. Nowadays American youngsters, no matter their social or economical background, all have access to fast information that can be instantly retrieved from the web. There is no need for them to learn what they find netsurfing, as information will always be ready for them"*. (Essay debating the issue on education).

In this case, both texts present clear cut differences between what is considered spoken and what is assumed to be written expression. In the first case the use of unfinished sentences, discourse markers, fill pauses, deviation of the topic sentences, and the abrupt end indicate that the medium used to transmit the message was the *speech medium* (see Crystal and Davy 1969: 68-70) while the second fragment presents a logical argument with a topic sentence developed through well-constructed sentences, and an appropriate use of vocabulary, punctuation and connectivity. The medium refers to the general distinction between messages transmitted through sound or through writing. Sometimes messages use what Crystal and Davy (1969: 70) call a *complex medium*, when the message might be written but intended to be delivered as speech, for example, a lecture, or spoken and transmitted in writing e.g. the

statement of a witness in the press. In order to define the characteristics of a text, it is necessary to accompany the medium with another concept, that of *mode*. *Mode* refers to the choices the speaker makes as to whether characteristics normally associated with speech or writing should be included in the message and to what extent, therefore, mode refers to the different types of language related to different contexts and different types of discourse.

Let us consider some examples of written texts meant to be spoken before an audience:

Our hearts are broken by their sudden passing. Our hearts are broken -- and yet, our hearts also have reason for fullness. Our hearts are full of hope and thanks for the 13 Americans who survived the shooting, including the congresswoman many of them went to see on Saturday. (Remarks by the President at a Memorial Service for the Victims of the Shooting in Tucson, Arizona, January, 2011).

If you don't like a person's vision for the country, you're free to debate that vision. If you don't like their ideas, you're free to propose better ideas. But, especially within hours of a tragedy unfolding, journalists and pundits should not manufacture a blood libel that serves only to incite the very hatred and violence they purport to condemn. That is reprehensible. (America's Enduring Strength by Sarah Palin on Wednesday, 12 January 2011).

Both excerpts were said before an audience that was yearning to be appeased after the terrible shooting in Tucson that killed 6 people and left many Americans dreading that they were unprotected and besieged by evil men. In both cases we can discern common features that inform us that the texts were meant to be proclaimed before an afflicted audience by the bloodshed. The spoken traits of the text can be traced in the use of repetition of words and syntactical constructions, the employ of simple sentences with few connectors, and the fast concatenation of ideas linked as simple enumerated items. Referring to what was above stated regarding the differences between medium and mode, we might claim that both these texts use a written medium but present a spoken mode. They also exhibit the structure and features of a monologue, but the purpose is to establish a dialogue to convince the audience.

In the first text the inclusive possessive adjective “our” repeated 4 times foregrounds the presence of the listener that is included in what the

speaker is saying. In Obama's speech the speaker identifies with the feelings of the listeners, and the only pause, represented here by a hyphen, presupposes an answer that identifies both speaker and listener. The vocabulary he uses applies to feelings as its main purpose is to move the audience to compassion through the repetitions of the word "hearts" and "our". He also uses literary devices such as antonymy and contraposition such as "broken hearts" "reasons for fullness" and "full of hope". Then, he refers directly to the people who were injured in the shooting, explaining in one short sentence what happened, when, where and who was involved in the action. His speech is well planned and structured, as corresponds to a written medium, but the mode used was the spoken one, when he appeared on television leading the Memorial Service for those killed in the Arizona slaughter. The speech is meant to produce a certain effect on the audience to make him appear before the American audience as a devoted President who cares and identifies with his people in times of sorrow and distress.

In the second text we have similar structural characteristics such as the repetition of the phrase "if you don't like", and the use of second personal pronoun "you" to address the audience, but the purpose of the speech differs somewhat. Here Palin uses the second "you" as if she were addressing an audience from which she expects a certain answer, but she does not include herself, she places herself above her listeners, she does not identify with the pain, and merely states facts that affects others. Then she changes to a third person that identifies certain profession, that of journalists, to try and explain the tragedy by naming culprits. The last sentence is simply a definition of what she considers wrong, but she distances herself from the suffering of the people. She uses a dialogic form to present a monologic statement: the tragedy should not serve to manufacture blood libels.

Finally, let us consider the characteristics of these two texts:

Tigers: I am a tiger, an animal that walks around like a great big beautiful cat. You know what, I am orange and black with lots of stripes, what do you think of that? I am big, oh, yes, very big, with huge teeth and powerful paws. (School text describing tigers for 5 year old children).

*Tigers: The **tiger** (*Panthera tigris*) is the largest cat species, reaching a total body length of up to 3.3 metres and weighing up to 306 kg. Their most recognizable feature is a pattern of dark vertical stripes on reddish-orange fur with lighter underparts. They have exceptionally stout teeth,*

and their canines are the longest among living felids. (Description of tigers in a dictionary).

Both texts are presented in a written medium and both are meant to be read, but the first text exhibits certain features related to speech, as is the use of the first person singular in which the object of description identifies with the writer, the use of discourse markers such as “you know what”, “oh, yes” and the use of a direct question to the reader. What is characteristic about the text is the way in which it is presented, as if it were a dialogue, and it is constructed in a way children can identify themselves with the content. The first person singular of the object of description aims at presenting tigers as the imaginary speaker who introduces himself to the reader by describing his own characteristics. The text tries to make children participate in the experience of description, for children learn facts through action. Here the text encourages children to act in order to learn what tigers are.

The second text presents a definition of the tiger typical of dictionary entries. It consists of a scientific description that uses the third person, the present tense, and the verb “to be” as an attributive verb that specify the characteristics attributes of tigers to define them using a specialized technical vocabulary. It is important to note the differences in the vocabulary used in both texts, as the first evidence of mode identified by speakers intuitively is the lexical form, and then the complexity of grammar used in the texts.

Therefore, we conclude that the division between spoken and written is deeply rooted in terms of recognition of modes and their adequacy to contexts. For our purpose it will be very useful to present students with a variety of texts that exhibit a wide range of features. In order to analyze different types of texts, whether predominantly spoken or written, we need to set frameworks that help us identify the texts. For example, Crystal & Davy (1969) offer a list of linguistic syntactic, lexical and phonological forms to examine different types of texts such as conversations, newspaper reports, religious language, etc. Within this framework of analysis relevant features are isolated, such as the medium, the relationship between participants, and modality, that is the different types of text used to convey the message. There are other frameworks developed by other linguists such as Chafe (1982) that uses functional categories such as *explicit and implicit*, which are tendencies rather than absolute categories of classification. Thus, spoken language tends to be more *implicit*, as the content conveyed can be understood by other means such as intonation,

body language, gestures, etc. Explicitness is required in written language as the whole meaning of the text should be conveyed in the written letter. Another functional category used by the same authors is the use division *context-free* versus *context-dependent* to describe written and spoken modes respectively. Nevertheless, we must regard these categories of analysis as mere indicators of whether a text uses the spoken or written medium as they are rather abstract. In order to identify a text as a written or a spoken fragment we must use other classification as the one presented by Biber and Finegan (1989) that use three sets of written versus spoken opposition:

- 1) Informational/ involved production
- 2) Elaborated/situation-dependent reference
- 3) Abstract/non-abstract style

These types of classification should always be viewed as approximations, but never understood as categorical for texts are very different and might show a variety of features. The important aspect for methodological objectives is to present students a wide range of texts to analyze and identify their features using tentative categories that will help them understand the content and purpose of texts.

2. ANALYSING AND EXPLOITING PATTERNS: THE DEVELOPING OF DISCOURSE

The first step in the analysis of patterns would be to give a definition of cohesion in English and expand on grammar and discourse management. In this stage Halliday's (1976, 1985 and 1989) theories will be considered. On one hand his studies, together with those of Hasan (1984, 1989), will contribute to explain the syntactic patterns of discourse, and on the other, at the level of context, the studies of Brown & Levinson (1978, 1987) and those of Blum-Kulka (1989a) are essential to explain the different social contexts in language production and interaction with others.

In order to analyze patterns we have to discuss the main types that we will be using. Following the patterns for text organization presented by Winter (1977, 1978) and Hoey (1983) we can distinguish three types of clause relations:

1. Problem-solution: here we have texts that introduce a problem in order to produce a response to the problem. Let us consider an example and see how the text has been construed:

“Since you’re here, you probably have a friend or loved one who is an alcoholic. And you probably want to know: how do you help an alcoholic in the real world? What can you do that will make a difference? The main thing is to work on changing your behavior, not the alcoholic”. (Advertisement on internet).

This text presents a written medium, but also exhibits the features of a spoken text, because what the writer intends is to involve the reader in the action. The predominance of the second person “you”, and the direct questions to the reader makes it a text that would be recognized as being spoken rather than written, but it is a written advertisement for self-help to overcome an addiction. The key to analyze the text is to understand it from the viewpoint of the writer’s intention to make readers identify with the problem and participate in the solution to the problem. Thus, the text presents a typical pattern of problem-solution where the first two sentences present a real situation, the two questions evaluate the situation of the problem and the last sentence gives a positive solution. In this case the clause connections are marked by the question-answer pattern explicitly expressed in the excerpt.

2. Hypothetical-real: in this second pattern the writer presents a statement which corresponds to a certain general conception of an item. Usually the hypothetical pattern is materialized by using expressions such as “it is widely known”, “commonly accepted”... and similar objective comment adjuncts, which according to Halliday, 'express the speaker's judgment regarding the relevance of the message' (Halliday 1973: 49). The real pattern contains what the reader considers to be the true statement and usually present subjective comment adjuncts, always referring to what the writer thinks is the real or true statement.

“One of the main challenges I have with single-book commentaries, especially Old Testament ones, is the way their authors place themselves at a distance from their material. It’s as if they’re holding the book at arms length, unwilling to be personally engaged by it. Not so with this one. Dan writes both pastorally, and personally. He has the academic chops to wield

Hebrew phrases and argue historical issues with the best of them. (Book review of God's Wisdom in Proverbs).

In this text the writer present a review of a book, and he does it referring to the general way in which commentary books are usually developed by their authors. In the first two sentences he unfolds the idea that these texts are usually treated in a very aseptic way avoiding the involvement of the writer in the material he is commenting. The third sentence begins with a forceful “not” thematizing this negative particle in order to contrast the hypothetical characteristics of commentary writers with the feature adorning the book the writer is about to review. The real pattern begins in this sentence explicitly contradicting the general assumed opinion with the real traits of this text. The main idea held in this review is the personal involvement of writers, and this particular book reviewer does it adopting a personal stance in the writing of this review.

3. General-particular or particular-general: this is a pattern that discusses both the deductive and the inductive method respectively. In order to illustrate or defend a specific thesis we may choose to go from a general statement supported by concrete examples or start with specific situations and then expand on to a general statement.

“A smoking ban is a controversial subject. Those who do not smoke, and have never smoked, often feel like there is no reason not to employ a public smoking ban. Smokers, however, feel like it is a personal right to be able to smoke in public, and the smoking ban issue is important and personal for them. In the 1990s, California became the first state to issue a smoking ban, and this was in restaurants. Since that time, many cities have taken up the drive to ban cigarette smoking in public locations, particularly restaurants.” (Ban on smoking).

The deductive method goes from a general idea that smoking ban is a controversial subject to a specific example of the prohibition of smoking in public places as is the case in California. The deductive approach begins with general assumptions (such as theory, laws, principles) and based on them, a specific hypotheses is construed which can be tested in order to support the general ideas. The inductive approach begins with specific things cases, evidences, proofs, etc., and based on the accumulation of such observation, a general idea is structured on that observation.

Once the student is able to recognize these different types of patterns, it is important to build a framework that allows the students to develop

their own arguments about a certain issue and decide what type of framework they are going to use in order to defend their theses. The most important aspects on discourse development are the following:

a) Openings and closings: the important aspect of openings is that they establish the kind of activity or the kind of communicative act that is going to take place. This is a key question to the type of genre that is culturally instituted, as it relates to the topic being discussed, the topical metafunction, the relationship of the participants, the interpersonal metafunction, and the type of message conveyed, the textual metafunction. The different genres are usually established in the openings, even though closings are as important in the recognition of text genre.

b) Discourse development. After the opening, texts have to be developed around different topics that should show coherence (Garcés 2001). This demands certain lexical and grammatical features that have to be pinpointed. Lexical choice is at the core of the ideological foundation in the creation of a text and it is as important as the different grammatical choices such as cohesive devices; tense, aspect and voice, and modality.

c) Discourse and cultural awareness: although this issue is controversial in the field of language teaching, it is, in fact, a relevant issue for the practice of writing as it helps the student to exploit form, function and socio-cultural meaning.

3. DESIGNING THE DISCOURSE SYLLABUS

When thinking about designing a syllabus we have to take into account that our objective is to reflect the notion of language-as-discourse, and to show that we propose a top-down division broad view that includes a wide variety of texts.

- 1) Mode and genre division
- 2) Discourse strategies
- 3) Cultural and social contexts

Taking into account these broad divisions, we can integrate specific identifications of grammatical and lexical items into mode and genre. Discourse strategies involve choice in lexico-grammatical features and choice in thematization, ellipsis and use of idioms, and the cultural and social contexts allow us to include a wide range of context-dependent texts.

We can summarize a heuristic model to assist teachers in developing the syllabus and approaching language from a discourse perspective. First

the Discourse World that we are going to divide into written and spoken as two broad concepts that admit a ranging of texts that go from characteristically written or spoken in mode and medium to more kaleidoscopic texts that include features typically written or spoken. Halliday interprets genre in a more restrictive way considering genre as a single characteristic of text or its organizational structure outside the linguistic system and not the essence of text as social process. In Halliday's concept of genre, the relationship between register and genre is that register represents the important relationship between texts and their social processes while genre is a lower order concept. But our view is closer to the one stated by Martin (2001), that claims that register and genre are semiotic systems distinct from other semiotic systems such as language, music, dance, images, etc, in the sense that they do not have a phonology of their own, and the only way they can create meaning is by using words and structures from the semiotic system we call language, a system able to generate its own meanings without making use of resources from another one. In short, register corresponds to the context of situation, and genre to the context of culture. For Martin (2001: 155), "a genre is a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture". Virtually everything we do involves some kind of genre. As the three register variables (field, tenor and mode) do not have their own forms of expression (words or structures), they have to make use of the lexico-grammatical structures from language, and this is done in two ways: first, by making certain linguistic choices much more likely than others, so that when we read or hear a text certain patterns start to emerge in a non-random way. The register categories take over a small number of linguistic choices as their own, certain linguistic choices, once made by the text producer, lead the hearer/reader to immediately identify the register in which the text is being produced. However, linguistic realizations should not be taken as register variables. Field, tenor and mode are register categories, whereas lexico-grammatical items are linguistic categories through which register is realized. Genres, like registers, need language to be realized. Genres create meaning by shaping the register variables –by conditioning the way field (what is going on in a given situational context), tenor (how people relate to one another within this situated event) and mode (the medium and the channel chosen for communication during the event) are combined in recurrent forms in a certain culture (Martin 2001). The combination of the register variables and the linguistic choices made within each of these variables seems to progress in stages, generating a goal-oriented structure that characterizes genres. As Martin (2001) points

out, the register variables change according to our communicative goals, and this is exactly what the concept of genre tries to explain: how we do things in our daily lives in culturally specific ways (e.g. how a class, a medical appointment, a job interview, an informal conversation or a research paper are developed and carried out).

From this we conclude that, in order to design a syllabus for learning writing, we will choose a wide variety of texts to analyse their characteristics within a flexible framework that will explain the main traits of the text, without restricting the categorization of the text, i.e. we may identify a text within one of the prototypes mentioned below, but we will also analyse all the features that characterize the text and that may pertain to other prototypes. Then, we will guide the students and help them produce texts to develop academic writing competence in English with a sense of genre awareness, but not restricting and delimiting the classification of texts.

The discourse strategies used for learning writing should be developed based on prototypes of texts that are dynamic and cannot be classified as belonging to a particular genre that complies with the characteristics that are supposed to belong to a rigid classification. Strategies are concerned with discursual features such as how arguments are presented, how different voices are combined and how various sections of the text are framed. I here propose certain prototypes and specific grammatical and lexico-grammatical characteristics that accompany them:

Reporting: there are different types of reports, though, such as weather report, a student report, a doctor's report on the condition of a patient, an annual report of a company, etc. But most of them use past tense, passives and relational processes.

Narrating: the registers used may vary, depending on the purpose; normally a characteristic is a chronological organization and the use of the past tense.

Persuading: Most argumentative texts try to convince the reader about the truth of a thesis. This requires certain modal adjuncts that express the writer's viewpoint expressed with objectivity.

Arguing: Arguments are powerful tools to express the writer's opinion and present a logical organization that requires appropriate connectors.

Describing: Description requires appropriacy in the use of adjectivization and, possibly, technical nouns that refer specifically to what is being described.

Instructing: Requires the use of imperatives, either direct, or phrases and modality that expresses politeness when instructing.

Explaining: This requires the use of the present tense and paraphrasing.

Recollecting: The use of the past tense and a personal involvement of the writer is essential to express facts of this function of the mind.

Reviewing: Requires a schematic structure that might not present complete sentences but just the necessary items that highlight the main aspects of the text.

Hypothesizing: Requires cause or conditional relationship that demonstrates the condition or cause and the result.

Having these prototypes as general classification of texts, it will be easier for students to start analysing the characteristics that are assumed to belong to a certain prototype and detect in which way the text follows them or deviates from them for a specific purpose. The social and cultural aspects are an intrinsic part of the development of discourse, and they should be part of the syllabus designed for learning writing, therefore the texts chosen should integrate them as part of the sociolinguistic competence of the learner.

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