

# **Discourse Analysis and its Application to Enhancing College Students' Reading Ability**

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## **I What is Reading?**

Is there any difference between traditional ideas and current ideas in teaching reading?

### **I-1 Traditional Ideas and Current Ideas of Reading**

Reading has generally been regarded as (1) looking at letters or sentences and vocalizing them, and (2) looking at letters or words or sentences and understanding their meanings. Such an idea of reading is especially common at Japanese schools. Thus, reading has mainly been taught through textbooks compiled for the purpose of enabling students to read in the sense above. School teachers' work, therefore, has been to make their students learn how to read the textbooks. There has scarcely been any room for the choice of reading materials, because all the textbooks used at school have to be those that have been supervised by the Ministry of Education. Those textbooks have been used as teaching materials almost one-sidedly by teachers, so that there have been very few opportunities for students to read books other than textbooks at school. In short, reading instruction in Japan has traditionally been dominantly teacher-centered.

As for reading English as a foreign language, teacher-centeredness has especially been remarkable. Students have almost always been dependent on their teachers, and the textbooks have been the only reading materials. The same textbooks used by all the students of one school or all the schools in one school area cannot interest all the students, much less motivate them to read more. Such having been the background of reading English at most junior and senior high schools, most college students lack the interest and motivation to read English.

Teaching English at college, therefore, must be improved immediately in order to make those students enjoy reading English with the help of more effective reading strategies.

### **I-2 Current Approaches to Reading**

According to Widdowson (1979), reading is not a reaction to a text but an interaction between writer and reader through the text. Reading is an act of participation in a discourse between interlocutors. (p.74) Silberstein (1994) also refers to reading as follows:

In contemporary approaches to reading, meaning is not seen as fully present in a text waiting to be decoded. Rather, meaning is created through the interaction of reader and

text. (p.7)

Reading defined as the above will enlarge the scope of reading English from mere passive work to active work, which will motivate students to enjoy reading English to the same extent as English conversation will. Generally speaking, Japanese college students invariably wish to become more proficient in English conversation. If the students can be guided to participate in the 'conversation' with the writer of the book they are reading in the same way as they do in English conversation classes, they will surely become much more interested in reading English. They will acquire autonomous habits of reading English with much more willingness.

## II Holistic Approaches to Reading as Communication

Since reading is commonly regarded as a communicative activity between writer and reader, just as interlocutors in conversation, there must be some values that are common in both.

### II-1 The Cooperative Principle:

According to Grice (1975), communication is characterized as being ruled by a principle that is referred to as the Cooperative Principle. It is as follows:

#### (1) Maxims of quantity

- 1) Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
- 2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

#### (2) Maxims of quality

Supermaxim: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

Maxims: 1) Do not say what you believe to be false.

2) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

#### (3) Maxim of relation

1) Be relevant.

#### (4) Maxim of manner

Supermaxim: Be perspicuous.

Maxims: 1) Avoid obscurity of expression.

2) Avoid ambiguity.

3) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

4) Be orderly.

Nuttall (1996) states that the maxims above can be applied to reading in that the reader assumes

(1) that the reader and the writer are using the same code (the language)

(2) that the writer has the message

(3) that the writer wants the reader to understand the message. (p.11)

This principle will assure the reader that the writer has written what the writer believes to be true and relevant with sufficient amount of words in the way the reader can under-

stand, and the reader can read on without being puzzled by the expression and the content of the text. To bring about such a friendly relationship between students and the writer can promote students' participation in reading and make the students enjoy reading English.

## II-2 Activating Schemata before Reading the Content

It is very rare for a writer or a speaker to write or speak only a single sentence to communicate with others. He abides by the Cooperative Principle and writes or speaks relevant sentences in order to convey what he really means. The sequence of those relevant sentences is referred to as discourse, and out of this discourse the reader or the listener draws the writer's or the speaker's intention. Therefore, the text can be regarded as an organized written discourse.

A correct understanding of discourse, whether written or spoken, is based on the schemata of the reader or the listener. According to McCarthy(1991),

'...new knowledge can only be processed coherently in relation to existing knowledge frameworks and the efficient reader activates the necessary frameworks to assist in decoding the text being read. The frameworks are not only knowledge about the world,...but also about texts, how texts are typically structured and organised...'(pp.168,169)

McCarthy refers to the former as content schemata and the latter formal schemata. He adds that it is often held that the teacher's job is to help the reader to activate the appropriate schemata and to roughly predict the content of the text. (ibid.)

## II-3 Top-down Processing

Most Japanese students tend to scrutinize every word of the text paying close attention to grammatical features of each sentence, with the result that they often fail to understand the meaning of the whole text. In fact, for most Japanese students reading seems to have been confined to decoding each sentence, or to bottom-up processing. They need to be trained to grasp roughly with top-down processing what the writer really means before reading the details.

Dubin and Bycina (1991) says, 'More salient to successful reading is being able to guess what the author will say next by confirming predictions related to one's past experience and knowledge of the language. Inevitably, this model took on the nickname of "top-down reading" since it stresses comprehension of larger units of meaning. Second language reading specialists were early advocates of this dynamic view of the nature of reading, with the result that many of the materials produced for reading in English as a second or foreign language adopted instructional strategies which stressed activities such as guessing the meaning of words from the context, previewing an article before reading it in order to have an overall view of its theme, and actively engaging in predicting what the author might say next.' (p.197)

Nuttall (1996) explains top-down processing as follows:

In top-down processing, we draw on our own intelligence and experience—the predictions we make, based on the schemata we have acquired—to understand the text. As we

saw, this kind of processing is used when we interpret assumptions and draw inferences. We make conscious use of it when we try to see the overall purpose of the text, or get a rough idea of the pattern of the writer's argument, in order to make a reasoned guess at the next step (on the grounds that having an idea of what something might mean can be a great help in interpreting it). ...The top-down approach gives a sense of perspective and makes use of all that the reader brings to text: prior knowledge, common sense, etc., which have sometimes been undervalued in the reading class. (pp. 16,17)

In short, teachers should, first of all, guide the students to be able to utilize the top-down processing so that all the students can grasp the general idea of the whole text and establish a friendly relationship with the writer of the text.

### III Atomistic Approaches to Reading

In order to understand the meaning of the whole text correctly, top-down processing alone does not suffice. It is inevitable for readers to have enough knowledge of the meaning of the words, phrases and sentences comprising the text. Readers of English as a foreign language, in particular, need to have sufficient grammatical knowledge as well as lexical knowledge.

#### III-1 Bottom-up Processing:

Processing the text from its lexical and grammatical components is called 'bottom-up' processing. Nuttall (1996) points out that this processing can be used when an initial reading leaves us confused, and works to complement 'top-down' processing. However, bottom-up processing should not stop at the stage of decoding the literal meaning of each discrete sentence in that not any one sentence exists independently in the text. All the sentences in the text have some linguistic and pragmatic relationships, so that the reader must further recognize and interpret cohesive devices that relate one sentence to another. Those cohesive devices include pro-forms (reference and substitution), ellipsis, lexical cohesion and discourse markers. Japanese college students, however, seem to be especially poor in recognizing the use of cohesive devices, above all, discourse markers and their functions for organizing sentences into a written discourse.

#### III-2 Discourse Markers

Nuttall (1996) classifies discourse markers as follows:

- (1) Markers that signal the sequence of events (e.g. then, first, next, the following day)
- (2) Markers that signal discourse organization
  - Sequencing (e.g. first of all, at this point, next, in conclusion)
  - Re-expressing (e.g. that is to say, or rather, to put it another way)
  - Specifying (e.g. namely, that is to say, to wit)
  - Referring (e.g. in this respect, in that connection, apart from this)
  - Resuming (e.g. to resume, to return to the previous point)
  - Exemplifying (e.g. to illustrate this, thus, for example)

Summarizing (e.g. to sum up, in short)

Focusing (e.g. let us consider, we must now turn to)

(3) Markers that signal the writer's point of view

(e.g. moreover, incidentally, similarly, however, as a matter of fact, in any case, therefore, certainly, more importantly) (pp. 95,96)

Japanese college students should acquire sufficient knowledge about the uses of these discourse markers through appropriate exercises in order to grasp the content of the text as a written discourse beyond the lexical and grammatical meaning of each sentence.

### III-3 Recognizing Functional Values of Sentences:

With the help of discourse markers, students should then learn to recognize the functional values of the sentences in the text. Nuttall's classification of them is as follows:

- (1) Independent functions as Defining, Classifying, Generalizing, Naming, Describing, Reporting, Speculating, Predicting
- (2) Text-dependent functions as Asserting, Exemplifying, Explaining, Reinforcing, Explicating, Hypothesizing, Commenting, Concluding
- (3) Interaction-dependent functions as Conceding, Evaluating, Inviting, Instructing, Apologizing, Suggesting, Complaining, Warning (pp. 101,102)

Sentences that have text-dependent and interaction-dependent functions may include using figures of speech such as metaphors, ironies, hyperboles, litotes, and other rhetorical expressions. Students should pay more attention to those figures of speech in understanding correctly what the writer really means, and moreover, they should be able to appreciate their effects in the text.

## IV What Type of Text is Preferable?

### IV-1 General Conditions of a Preferable Text

There will be little or no objection to the idea that reading is an interaction between the writer and the reader. Therefore, appropriate approaches to true reading will be

- (1) to activate the reader's schemata about the theme of the text so that the reader can have access to the writer's schemata
- (2) to utilize top-down processing for the purpose of grasping the general idea of the text
- (3) to utilize bottom-up processing in order to complement understanding with the necessary lexical and grammatical knowledge and especially with cohesive devices
- (4) to understand what message the writer really intends to send to the reader through the formal structure and the pragmatic structure of the text.

In order to grasp the formal structure, it is necessary to know the general rules about how sentences become a paragraph and how paragraphs constitute a text. The following will be the basic knowledge for Japanese college students:

- (1) A paragraph has at least one topic sentence.

- (2) Old information usually precedes new information in a sentence.
- (3) Every sentence has its functional value. (See III-3)
- (4) Every sentence has some cohesive or coherent elements in it.
- (5) Some sentences have meanings other than their literal meaning.

In short, a preferable text should be one that the reader can acquire skills to interact with the writer by reading the text with the above approaches.

#### IV-2 An Example of Preferable Texts for Japanese College Students

Most Japanese college students have been obliged to read English as a school subject, so that not many of them are interested in reading English which has been taught mainly with teacher-centered methods using the same textbooks. The first step of improvement, therefore, will be to introduce more learner-centered methods by using texts that will interest as many students as possible. Newspaper articles and magazine stories will be the most suitable because of their variety in contents. Students should be allowed to choose an article or a story out of the newspapers and the magazines that the teacher shows the students as reading materials. The teacher then forms several groups each of which consists of students who have chosen the same text. Students read the text they have chosen with their own will helping one another in finding the meaning of difficult words and sentences using dictionaries. They can cope with most of the difficulties in reading the text because they are interested in its content. The teacher has only to give advice to each group when it has encountered expressions far beyond their comprehension. The following is an example of a text taken from a newspaper article that will be chosen by sumo wrestling fans and the procedure of teaching.

### TEXT

Takanohana likely to win 4th straight  
Kyodo News

With no serious contenders in the way, Yokozuna Takanohana stands a good chance at claiming his fourth straight Emperor's Cup at the Autumn Grand Sumo Tournament, which begins today at Tokyo's Ryogoku Kokugikan.

The 24-year-old yokozuna has proven solid on the practice halls and appears ready to take the challenge—and easily too, as the other top wrestlers who might otherwise pose a threat to the grand champion are injury-ridden or lacking final polish.

The other yokozuna, Akebono, who took on Takanohana in a showdown on the final day of the July tourney in Nagoya, is still suffering from a left shoulder injury sustained in Nagoya. Nevertheless, he has gotten the green light to compete from stablemaster Azumazeki.

The most fully geared ozeki, Takanonami, is hampered by a stubborn leg injury sustained in the previous championship, while fellow ozeki grapplers Wakanohana and Musashimaru are displaying only mediocre form.

Takanohana seems intent on winning another Emperor's Cup, but is not hyped up about

stretching his winning streak. "I want to give my best in order to produce good results," he said repeatedly in response to questions regarding a possible "four-peat."

A major attraction, meanwhile, of this 15-day championship is the emergence of Kyokushuzan, the first Mongolian to join sumo's topmost makuuchi division. His diverse techniques have been brewing up the expectations of sumo watchers.

Slim for a sumo wrestler at 181 centimeters and 120 kilograms, Kyokushuzan, 23, makes up for the deficit with strong legs and back. How well Kyokushuzan will fare in his makuuchi debut, however, will depend largely on his initial charge at the start of each bout.

Also making a debut in the makuuchi division is Daihisho, who sports a dynamic wrestling style.

Up for promotion to sumo's second-highest rank again, Kaio needs to win at least 12 matches to lift himself out of the sekiwake spot he has held for 11 consecutive tournaments.

Pressure would not be a problem for the experienced Tomozuna stable wrestler. What concerns Kaio, who recorded a 10-5 mark in Nagoya, is the pain in his lower back which has hindered his training for the autumn meet. (Extract from September 8's Daily Yomiuri)

### PROCEDURE

1. Pre-reading: Discussing who will win the championship at the Autumn Grand Sumo Tournament.
2. Scanning to find who the writer says will win the championship from the title and other parts of the article
3. Skimming the whole article without using dictionaries and grasping the outline of what the writer intends to say
4. Bottom-up processing of the text using dictionaries—preferably using English-English dictionaries paying attention to cohesive devices
5. Summarizing the content of each paragraph finding the topic sentence and the supporting sentences.
6. Finding relationships between the contents of each paragraph such as: problem-solution, hypothesis-evidence, classification-example, cause-result, assertion-substantiation (example, explication ), etc.
7. Summarizing the writer's opinion and commenting on it from each student's point of view
8. Giving assignment to read the newspaper article about sumo every day until the end of the tournament and compare the writer's prediction about the championship winner with that of each student

Each of the above activities is recommended to be practiced in English by the cooperative work among group members. This will certainly promote all the students to participate actively in reading the text and enhance their reading ability to the stage of autonomous reading.

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