

# Teaching English as discourse: A challenge for the ELICOS classroom

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*This paper joins a growing number of calls for a more discourse-focused approach to teaching English. One call is coming from researchers such as Firth and Wagner (1997), Miller (1997) and Peirce (1995) who challenge the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories which guide much of our English language teaching practice. They argue that these theories and our application of them in the language classroom regard language acquisition as the process of mentally acquiring separate bits of language and view the learner as deficit. They argue that language learning is about the acquisition of discourse because language as communication is essentially a set of contextually-situated discursive practices. They contest the notion of the learner as defective communicator and instead propose a view of the learner as successful communicator, utilising his/her available linguistic resources. The paper follows some of these arguments and contrasts the theoretical principles of a discourse approach to language acquisition with those of the traditional SLA approach. The discussion looks at the application of these principles in the English language classroom and joins the calls, also coming from English language teachers and methodologists such as Petrovitz (1997) and Nunan (1998), for a discourse focus in areas such as teaching grammar.*

## **Introduction**

The issues that I raise in this article concern teaching English as discourse in the ELICOS classroom. Discourse is an elusive term and has been used by different people to mean different things - as McCarthy states, the study of discourse has grown into 'a wide-ranging and heterogeneous discipline' (1991:7). In this paper I first want to look at some definitions of discourse, exploring the different perspectives alluded to in McCarthy's observation. Secondly, I want to canvas some views on the current state of teaching English as discourse in the language classroom. Next, I explore the call to view language as discourse in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory. It is safe to say that much of our practice in second language teaching has been influenced and guided by findings and developments in the field of SLA research and theory. This relationship is further strengthened by the fact that a large amount of SLA research has been conducted in second language classrooms (Firth and Wagner, 1997). Theorists such as Firth and Wagner (1997), Miller (1997), and Peirce (1995) are contesting the nature of SLA theory and its primary focus on the cognitive nature of language acquisition. They are arguing for a greater orientation to discourse and the socio-cultural influences on acquisition. In particular they are concerned with reconceptualising the learner. Given the close connection between SLA theory and second language teaching, this paper suggests that

these developments could be significant for those of us operating in the second language classroom. Finally, I will look at the classroom as the site of innovation and offer some ways for promoting discourse awareness.

### ***What is discourse?***

It is important at the outset to define the term 'discourse'. To get started, let's look at two pieces of language:

*(A) Milo is a delicious source of energy and nutrition. They are ideal for first aid and applying ointment and lotion. Soccer makes for a great night out. 'Can you stop doing that please.' 'It's down the street on the left'. Short courses are conducted which you can pay to attend.*

*(B) Jackie after Jack. Portrait of the lady. Christopher Andersen. Viking. For my magnificent Kate. What is my proudest achievement? I went through some pretty difficult times, and I kept my sanity. Jackie. Preface. From the very beginning, theirs was destined to be one of the most celebrated unions of the twentieth century: he the handsome, charismatic young standard-bearer of one of America's most powerful families, she the darkly beautiful thoroughbred.*

If we ask ourselves which stretch of language has a sense of unity and makes sense, the answer is (B). In fact, you as reader could probably reinstate the original layout and identify the genre, the title, the author, and the dedication. You could make predictions about the continuation and say whether you would read on. You could probably situate the story in a historical context and associate it with certain events. This is all despite the fact that the extract has only three complete sentences out of 10 units of language. (B) is meaningful and unified while (A) isn't. Part of the meaningfulness comes from recognition of the social and historical context in which the language is embedded. It is this meaningfulness (coherence) which is essential to communication and therefore, critical to the notion of discourse.

Cook (1989) makes the point that foreign language learning is about communication and is not explained by focusing on perfectly-formed sentences and their internal grammar. The example (A) consists of complete sentences, four of which appeared on leaflets and products and two which I heard spoken. Irrespective of the fact that the sentences are perfectly-formed, the stretch of language has no sense of unity and does not make sense. Cook argues that the question of whether discourse is communicating depends on the way we use it or think about it, rather than on its conformity to rules. What matters is whether it is recognised by its receivers as coherent. He defines discourse as language in use; for communication (Cook 1989:6).

McCarthy (1991:7) is also concerned with discourse as language in use but is more detailed in his definition, arguing that discourse is 'a description of language above the sentence and an interest in the contexts and cultural influences which affect language

in use'. These influences and meanings are manifested in text. As Santoro (1999:16) argues:

*A text is much more than an example of written language or an abbreviation for a textbook. Texts are "any instance of written and spoken language that has coherence and coded meanings" (Luke 1995:11).*

Both Cook and McCarthy approach discourse from a second language teaching and learning perspective. However, the notion of discourse has also been used in the field of critical literacy and social theory to explain how language affects the construction of identity. As a way of reconciling these different perspectives, Gee (1990:142) distinguishes between 'little *d* discourse' and 'capital *D* Discourse'. Little *d* discourse is 'connected stretches of language that make sense', i.e. related to Cook's and McCarthy's definitions above and illustrated by example (B). Capital *D* Discourse, on the other hand, is:

*a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or "social network" or to signal [that one is playing] a socially meaningful "role".*

Moore (1997) makes the point that Gee's conclusion is that discourses can be learned (and therefore taught) whereas Discourses are mastered through acquisition, not learning. However it would seem that the two discourses are not mutually exclusive but rather inextricably intertwined. The sense (or meaning) in discourse, i.e. in connected stretches of language, only makes sense within the context of particular Discourses.

For the purposes of this discussion, given its second language teaching and learning focus, discourse will be defined in accordance with the views of Cook and McCarthy. In other words, discourse is language in use; language as communication; with an interest 'above the sentence' in the contexts and cultural influences which affect the way that the language is used. Consequently an argument favouring teaching English as discourse means teaching English as it is used in real communication. Such an approach highlights the socio-cultural influences which contextualise the communicative event, and discerns how these influences drive the participants' language choices. The communication exists in the form of a text; therefore text is the logical starting point for analysing discourse in the classroom. In a discourse approach, the text is unravelled to identify the influences acting on its construction, e.g. the nature of the social relationship between the participants and their communicative purpose. The teaching explicates the way these factors are encoded in language choices across all levels, from text structure (i.e. genre) and cohesive devices and to the grammatical structures and lexis at the sentence level.

It is important to note that this approach does not exclude a focus on grammar. Grammatical accuracy is obviously an important element in being able to communicate

in a language. However as Cook (1989:6) states: 'We should recognize that there is more to producing and understanding meaningful language - to communicating - than knowing how to make or recognize correct sentences'. It appears that most of our students come to an English-speaking country such as Australia to develop English "language in use" skills. This suggests that our response as English language teachers should be to use discourse as our primary unit of teaching in order to help our students create the spoken and written texts that they need to participate effectively in Australian and international communities. In summary, teaching English as discourse includes analysis of formal sentence grammar but more importantly, focuses 'above the sentence' to systematically identify the socio-cultural influences which shape a text, including the choice of grammatical features at the sentence level.

### ***What is the state of discourse in the English language classroom?***

Now to the question of whether this approach is currently being used in the language classroom. Celce-Murcia (cited in Conway and Thaine 1997) stresses the effectiveness of a discourse-approach to language teaching. She notes that 'one can always pull a sentence out of authentic discourse for closer structural attention and practice, but one cannot always provide authentic discourse for a decontextualised sentence' (1996:9). Petrovitz (1997) takes up the point of contextualisation and argues that while the need for contextualisation of ESL grammar instruction has long been recognised, a great deal of traditional teaching methodology persists in this area. He claims that the model of the traditional coursebook, in which every rule is presented by means of a general explanation followed by an exercise consisting of a series of non-contextualised sentences, is found to a greater or lesser degree in most grammar materials.

Nunan (1998) is also concerned that grammar in textbooks is often presented in a linear fashion and out of context and that 'learners are denied the opportunity of seeing the systematic relationships that exist between form, meaning and use' (1998:102). He says that we English language teachers need to give our learners tasks that dramatise the relationship between the grammatical items and the discursive contexts in which they occur. This is because in general communication beyond the classroom, grammar and context are so closely related that appropriate choices can only be made with reference to the context and the purpose for communication.

My own observations and discussions with teachers in my various job roles over the years tend to bear out some of the concerns raised above. In areas of teaching where coursebooks dominate, the temptation is often to focus on grammatical structures in isolation. The structures are presented devoid of context or when context is provided, with little attention given to the significant contextual forces operating on the text. The primary focus is often on form with meaning addressed in terms of the rules listed in the coursebook. This is not to suggest that all English language teachers present grammar in this way. In a discussion at the recent ELICOS Association (EA) conference in Adelaide

(October 14-16, 1999), some people said that they were using authentic texts and suggested that linear, decontextualised grammar teaching was a thing of the past. This may be the case but the concerns raised above and those voiced by people such as David Scott and Rob Brown at the EA conference, lead me to think that we are yet to make the collective mindshift to teaching English as discourse. Some valuable research in this area might be to uncover exactly how we as a group are teaching grammar.

***A call for greater orientation to discourse in SLA theory***

As stated above, theorists in the area of SLA are also arguing for a greater orientation to discourse and the socio-cultural aspects of second language acquisition. Researchers such as Firth and Wagner (1997) argue that SLA research to date has focused on the individual and his/her cognitive processes rather than on the interactional and sociolinguistic dimensions of language. Consequently, they claim, SLA theory is flawed because it doesn't provide insights into the central issue, i.e. the language use of the second or foreign language (S/FL) speakers. For them, the nonnative speaker (NNS) is cast as 'a defective communicator, limited by an underdeveloped communicative competence' (1997:285) while the native speaker (NS) is elevated to the 'idealized' and the norm. NS and NNS interactions are characterised as inherently problematic or at the very least, unusual, rather than seen as communicative successes. The researchers put the case that in these interactions '(r)ather than dominance, incompetence, and undeveloped FL ability, we are witness to collaboration, sharing, resourcefulness, the skilful and artful application of a mechanism to effect collaboration in talk, and thus an efficient division of labour between the participants' (Firth & Wagner 1997:294).

Peirce (1995) takes up the case of the learner of a second language and is concerned primarily with issues related to Gee's 'capital *D* Discourse'. She says that many SLA researchers have assumed that learners can be defined unproblematically as motivated or unmotivated, introverted or extroverted, inhibited or uninhibited and that these have a bearing on how well they will acquire the language. She questions these assumptions, arguing that the theory does not take into account that such factors 'are frequently socially constructed in inequitable relations of power, changing over time and space, and possibly coexisting in contradictory ways in a single individual' (1995:12). She argues that SLA theory needs to develop a conception of the language learner as having a complex social identity which is formed out of and by language. She also proposes the notion of investment. In a discussion of her research using data from migrant women in Canada, she argues that investment rather than motivation more accurately describes the relationship between English and the women's sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practise it. She takes the position that if learners invest (not just, or, even in, money terms) in a second language, they do so with the hope or expectation to have a good return on their investment - 'a return which will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources' (Peirce 1995:17).

Miller (1997) has summarised the key points raised by Firth and Wagner and other researchers in a table contrasting the differences between traditional SLA orientations and the research approach viewing language as discourse.

<b>SLA</b>	<b>language as discourse</b>
Cognitivist and mentalist orientations	Social and contextual orientation
Individual competence	Competence realised socially through interaction
Native speaker as idealised source of perfectly realised competence	Competence realised by all speakers to varying degrees in a range of situations
Native/nonnative binary	Collaboration of native speaker and nonnative speaker in discourse
Standardised language as a goal	Standardised language as a myth
Focus on formal learning environments e.g. language classrooms	Draws on discourse in a range of settings; broadening of the data base to include naturalistic settings
Search for generalisable rules and methods	Understanding the contingency of local contexts
Lack of a learner perspective; motivated by researcher	Centrality of participant perspectives
Learner as "subject"	Speaker as a social identity, one of many identities
Difficulties predominate in studies	Consideration of communicative successes; problems viewed as contingent social phenomena
Focus on development of grammatical competence	Focus on contextual and interactional dimensions of language use
Learner as defective communicator	Learner/speaker drawing on resources in an interactional context
Misunderstandings normal in native/nonnative communication	Misunderstandings normal in all communication
Interlanguage, fossilisation and foreign talk are key concepts	Language use and social context as key concepts

(Miller 1997:47-48)

### *Back in the ELICOS classroom*

We have seen above that the moves to incorporate discourse and socio-cultural considerations into English language teaching echo similar calls in SLA theorising. The next step is to explore how the points raised above might influence our practice in the ELICOS classroom. In this part of the paper, I will address two points: (1) the learner in the English language classroom and (2) some ways of developing discourse awareness.

### *The learner in the second language classroom*

In light of the discussion above, it is clear to me that we teachers face a challenge in our ELICOS classrooms. We are being asked to recognise our students as multi-dimensional identities operating in socio-cultural contexts. To do this, we must go beyond the classroom-bound view of the student as defective communicator needing to be filled full of grammatical structures and other bits of language in order to become communicatively competent. We must acknowledge that our students are looking for the discursive practices which will make them effective in their chosen fields of endeavour. For them, English is the crucial part of a future plan e.g. successfully completing a degree at an Australian university; obtaining a better job at home; exploring greater business opportunities in the world market. They are living in Australia but learning English for purposes other than life in Australia. For these students, learning English is an investment which they believe will give them greater access to resources, as Peirce suggests.

Our challenge as teachers is to facilitate the students' mastery of the discourses that they need. As pointed out above by Celce-Murcia, Petrovitz and Nunan, we must alert our students to the importance of discourse considerations for effective communication and stress that a focus solely on grammatical structures is not enough. In language in use, structures are embedded in text and used in combination to acknowledge relationships and to communicate meaning. It follows that texts, both spoken and written, are key resources for highlighting discursual features.

It may well happen that the coursebooks on our shelves do not actively pursue a discourse approach to teaching language. In that case we have to supplement. Following are some approaches and activities which can be adopted and adapted to meet your discourse needs in the ELICOS classroom.

### *Developing discourse in the L2 classroom*

Cook (1989:80) proposes a model of discourse which attempts to identify the levels of language from above the sentence down to the sentence level. As a top-down approach, his hierarchy is: social relationships (incorporating culture); shared knowledge; discourse type; discourse structure; discourse function; conversational mechanisms; cohesion; grammar and lexis; and sounds or letters.

Conway and Thaine (1997) modified the grammar syllabus of their Cambridge/RSA CELTA course along similar lines to those proposed by Cook in order to make it more discourse based. By working with texts, they explored with trainees issues such as the context in which a piece of language was spoken; the identity of the speakers and the nature of their relationship; and the language itself. They examined text-level features such as lexical chains and referencing and verb tenses at the sentence level.

Cook (1989) has suggested tasks which teachers can use to develop students' awareness of discourse. Two of these are as follows:

### **Task 1**

**Aim:** To consider the effect of social relationships on the development of your students' discourse skills.

**Resources:** Knowledge of students; classroom observation

**Procedure:** (1) Consider the teacher-student relationship in terms of issues such as 'office', 'status' and 'role'. How do these issues impact on the individuals in the classroom?

(2) How might you as teacher change the social structure of your classroom to give students a wider variety of practice. For example, can you give the students power to initiate or terminate activities, nominate in turn-taking, correct each other and so on.

**Evaluation:** Are there any ways of overcoming the lack of variety in social relationships in your classroom or is it unavoidable in an institutional educational setting?

*(Adapted from Cook 1989:143-144)*

### **Task 2**

**Aim:** To analyse turn-taking in your classes (Turn-taking is a feature of discourse structure but is impacted upon by other levels.)

**Resources:** A cassette recorder. A transcription of a conversation between you as teacher and your students.

**Procedure:** (1) Record a conversation in the classroom. Transcribe a short portion of it.  
(2) Analyse the transcription in terms of the ways that turns are gained, held and passed.

**Evaluation:** Does the teacher exercise turn-taking rights beyond those of the students? Are the students acquiring as wide a range of conversational skills as possible?

*(Adapted from Cook 1989, p. 151)*

### Task 3

Aim: Teaching conversational English

I would like to suggest that Cook's model could be successfully applied to the teaching of conversational English. Recordings and transcriptions of conversations between proficient English speakers could form the basis of very useful analysis and awareness-raising. The analysis could be approached systematically using Cook's hierarchy of language levels given above. It seems to me that such a discourse approach will be more effective than those conversational English syllabuses which present a sequence of functions such as giving opinions, requesting information, expressing interest, and then expect the students to be conversationally proficient.

### Task 4

Aim: Developing an awareness of context and shared knowledge

Magazines and advertisements are good sources of one-liners which are amusing or interesting, not for what they say, but for what we know about their contexts. Such one-liners can be useful in our teaching as ways of alerting students to context and shared knowledge, and their importance. An example:

Why did *Who* magazine (20.9.99) include this quote in its 'Quotable notables mouth off' column?

*"I can give you a guy to call"*

(Monica Lewinsky suggesting a story on men who can't commit, to US Marie Clare).

### Task 5

Aim: Teaching grammar in context

A careful reading of newspapers yields plenty of articles which can be used to teach grammatical structures. An example:

<b>Save our strays</b>	
<i>Photograph of Max</i>	Max, a 17-month-old border collie Australian cattle dog cross, is looking to join a new family. Currently staying at the RSPCA Refuge at Fairfield, Max is gentle but ideal for a family without young children. He has been desexed, immunised and heartworm tested. Last week's dog, Jess, is still looking for a home. Phone the RSPCA on 3848 0522.

(From *Southern News* Thursday, September 23, 1999)

The article is obviously a natural habitat for structures such as the present continuous and the present simple as well as the present perfect passive and several examples of ellipsis. However the choice of these structures has been determined by the context and the meaning which the journalist is wanting to impart. Analysis of the text would start with these issues. For example: What is the situation? What is the intention of the writer ie journalist? Is Max a person? Why does the journalist say that Max is gentle but that he should go to a family without young children? What does this tell us about Max's personality? What has happened to Max in the past? What is his present situation? Once a full understanding of the text has been established, the presentation can move to the sentence level with analysis of the meaning and form of the grammatical structures.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has argued for a greater focus on teaching English as discourse. Discourse was defined as language in use; language as communication with a focus 'above the sentence' ie on the contexts and social relationships which come into play to create the communication and which are instrumental in determining the choices of grammatical and lexical features at the sentence level. The discussion presented the arguments being put by English language methodologists for greater contextualisation of language in English language teaching. Nunan's (1998) organic approach to language acquisition challenges the linear view of acquisition and proposes an approach to English teaching which allows the students to see the items occurring in their natural contexts. This discussion has also explored developments in SLA theory which are calling for a more equal integration of socio-cultural orientations into language acquisition theory. In particular they are arguing for a rethinking of the learner in the second language acquisition process. Ways were also suggested in which the innovations discussed throughout the paper could be applied in the ELICOS classroom.

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*Who weekly* magazine. September 20, 1999

#### **Note**

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