

Written Discourse Investigation a Study Based on Undergraduate Students

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Abstract: Discourse analysis in terms of both spoken and written language is believed to be helpful for both linguists and language teachers. Written discourse is considered an imperative aspect that needs to be analyzed. Cohesion, coherence, clause relations and text patterns are all parts of written discourse. This study attempts to provide a vehicle for understanding student perceptions about writing and writing instruction through a case study supported by discourse analysis of student talk. The undergraduate students in this study participated in interviews and focus groups about their experiences with writing. The findings reveal deep seeded notions about writing enculturated through their under-graduation. Students were not likely to take ownership of their writing, rather considering it a teacher construct, and could not typically describe the application of writing skills.

Keywords—discourse analysis; writing instruction; student voice;

Introduction

If you are studying the relationship between language and the context it is utilized in, then you are analyzing the discourse. Discourse can be either written, such as in books, essays, newspapers, magazines, road signs or invoices, or spoken, such as in conversations, verbal interactions and TV programmes. Discourse analysts study language in either spoken or written use. According to Gee and Handford (2013:5), the importance of discourse analysis “lies in the fact that, through speaking and writing in the world, we make the world meaningful in certain ways and not in others”. Although Coulthard (2014) makes a distinction between spoken discourse and written texts, this distinction is by no means universally accepted. Recently, the scope of linguists has switched from analyzing single sentences to the distribution of linguistic elements in extended texts and the relationship between texts and social situations. This paper’s focus will be devoted to written texts in order to afford an understanding of how natural written discourse looks and sounds. This understanding will boost the production of teaching materials (McCarthy, 1991). By taking the scope of this paper into account, discussing written texts normally includes the consideration of cohesion, coherence and text patterns. Thus, each aspect will be discussed in the following sections.

Backgorund Works

The analysis of discourse - frequently defined as “language use above the level of the sentence” (Stubbs, 1983) - provides students with the opportunity to study the meaningful

production and interpretation of texts and talk. In undergraduate programmes in Linguistics and English Language at the University of Sussex, courses in discourse analysis are taught at level 3. Students therefore come to discourse studies after completing courses in syntax, semantics and pragmatics and the analysis of discourse encourages students to reconsider and re-evaluate the 'rules' of language with which they are already familiar. As Miller (2002) explains in his article on the subject of discourse analysis, the examination of texts problematizes traditional word-class classifications and sheds new light on the functions and workings of grammatical categories (tense, mood and aspect, for example). Indeed, the study of the structure and texture of texts as whole units challenges the very concept of 'sentence' and, by adding to other approaches to language study, enriches students' understanding of how language works.

In this respect, students may be encouraged to critically engage with the definition of discourse as 'supra-sentential language use' and explore how the meaning and interpretation of a text may be negotiated around the selection and use of particular syntactic and lexical forms or even aspects of pronunciation. For example, recent class-based analysis undertaken by my final-year students reveals how Tony Blair's use of vernacular phonological features in party political broadcasts has increased over the past ten years. Critical examination of the reasons for Blair's changing pronunciation leads students to consider, for example, the extent to which politicians may use strategies to 'sound' ideologically attractive to public audiences and, in the case of Blair, to manipulate his voice to (re-)construct himself as a 'man of the people'. In undertaking such analysis, students therefore learn that there is an intricate (almost symbiotic) interplay between discourse approaches that take as their starting point the linguistic level at which the utterances are produced and those approaches that interpret utterances from the starting point of the context in which they occur. Through the study of discourse analysis students may gain an advanced and sophisticated understanding of the concept of 'context'. Also defined or described as the study of 'language in context' or (real life) 'language in use' (Brown and Yule 1983, Woods 2006), discourse analysis draws students to the investigation of socially-situated texts and talk. Students engage with the study of how, in social interaction, human beings convey their meaning not as an individualistic enterprise but because of dynamic and ongoing negotiation with their interlocutors. In this way, students gain knowledge and understanding of the (symbolic) function of language in social life, and the role that language plays in the construction and shaping of social relationships. Since such relationships are frequently characterized by differential patterns of authority and influence, students have the opportunity to explore how power relations underpin the construction and meaning of discourse, and to learn about the ways in which control, dominance and inequality may be both asserted and resisted in discourse. Experience shows that students are particularly drawn to this type of Critical Discourse Analysis and there is a wealth of data that can be drawn upon to teach and encourage this interest. While various forms of political discourse provide archetypal material, examples of texts taken from, for example, medical interviews, courtroom testimonies and classroom contexts also offer germane discourse data for critical analysis. Other theoretical approaches routinely included in courses on discourse analysis include Speech Act Theory, Ethnography, Interactional Sociolinguistics and Conversation Analysis. It is clearly vital that students are introduced to relevant theories and it is equally important that they learn how to apply these theoretical perspectives to real life language use. While it may appear intuitively sound to introduce

theory before practice, experience suggests that it is in the careful weaving together of the two that students gain the most advanced and highly developed understanding of discourse (perhaps to be seen at its best in Deborah Schiffrin's (1994) *Approaches to Discourse* - a text which is most suitable for students with some experience of discourse analysis). Different theoretical approaches can be applied to the discourses of various domains, and an advantage of teaching and studying discourse is that a wealth of relevant data is available for analysis: a conversation or a letter; a speech, a memo or a report; a broadcast, a newspaper article or a testimonial; a lesson, a consultation or an interview. While it is arguable that discourse analysis can be treated purely as a 'research method' (see Johnson (2002) for an approach which is grounded in this supposition), the study of discourse ought to encourage students to ask their own ontological and epistemological questions and, ideally, should lead students to an awareness of the way in which discourse analysis can be applied to (and is a way of thinking about and approaching) a range of problems in the humanities and social sciences. A particular advantage of locating discourse studies in the final year of undergraduate programmes is that students are likely to have gained the experience and confidence required to construct their own innovative research questions. Final-year students I am currently teaching are seeking to answer such questions as: How does the discourse of pro-anorexia websites glamorize eating disorders through the construction of a virtual community of practice? How is masculinity represented in football fandom?

Why is drug use and misuse represented differently in the discourse of the media and drug support agencies? How are stereotypes associated with homosexuality perpetuated in 'safe sex' health education information? Why does political discourse rely on metaphors of movement? The investigation of such questions often involves the adoption of a set of methods that draw upon different approaches and so lead students to an understanding of the interrelationship (and tensions) between different ways of looking at and interpreting a text.

Conceptual Framework

In discussing the data collection and analysis conducted during this research, an understanding of the theoretical underpinnings used in the approach are necessary. First, as the content area of focus in this study is writing, a foundation of the current state of writing instruction in public schools is necessary to understand the larger context in which the observed writing experiences of the participants is situated. Second, in an effort to understand the interplay of student experience with students' perspective, positioning theory contains useful information as to how students navigate their perceptions of writing. Lastly, the study of discourse situates the approach toward student language as it considers the linguistic and contextual underpinnings of verbal and non-verbal communication to decipher meanings and perspectives. The mingling of these theories ultimately meets the needs of addressing the key questions raised at the outset of this research. Writing: There is a wealth of information about writing instruction and how students learn to write. Applebee and Langer (2011) conducted a four-year study of middle and high schools nationwide. In this study, they found that much had improved in the 30 years since the last national study, but that many problems remained and new issues had emerged. Of greatest issue may be that writing instruction remains largely teacher-centered with students as supporting actors; the teacher creates, via writing the prompt and creating the requirements, and the students "does" the writing, merely filling in required components rather than composing. They also found that little class time is devoted

to explicit writing instruction; the teacher typically assumes writing competence and expects results based on content. The researchers emphasize that teachers ask for analysis and let the writing instruction lead toward discussions during class, yet the missing connection found in this study seems to be that the condensation of these expectations after teachers create assignments largely results in regurgitation and summarization by students. Other research attempts to highlight what is known of effective writing and writing instruction. Writing requires the ability to transfer a number of skills and intelligences from multiple content areas to be effective. This cognitive ability to use their learning in a multiplied modality such as writing is not explicitly taught in many situations (Graham, Gillespie, & McKeown, 2013; Kiuahara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009). Students are most successful given situations to make some choices in the writing process and learn the techniques to combine in responding to written assignments (Olson & Land, 2007; Scherff & Piazza, 2005). Effective environments and situations for student writing involve clear, individualized expectations, and outcomes; students are more motivated given a purpose and an audience (Graham et al., 2013; Kaplan, 2008). There is a disconnect between the design and expectation of school writing and that of the writing that occurs in college and the workplace; however, students tend to be more motivated when they can see connections toward these eventualities (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Kiuahara et al., 2009). Additionally, Gutierrez, Morales, and Martinez (2009) found that deficit models of teaching, a focus on all the shortcomings rather than playing to strengths of each individual student, contribute to many culturally non-majority students becoming disengaged in school writing. Data analysis: Data collection methods and procedures were designed with eventual data analysis within the proposed theoretical framework in mind. The interview process was key to gathering data for use in discourse analysis. Using discourse analysis, it is possible to extrapolate both student positioning and perception about writing. Language can reveal student thinking about themselves, the instruction, and other students; this study considers this language with relation to writing. Transcripts were coded and examined for indicators of grammatical and contextual discourse elements. Observation field notes were coded and held across from both the research questions and codes from the interviews. Observations were designed to help collect data toward interactions and communication between students directly whereas interview data could only divulge about the individual student and his own experiences and perspectives. The focus group added to the analysis of interactions among students and helped in the discussion around positioning. Audio transcripts were coded and interpreted using discourse analysis to look for grammatical cues toward positions and situated meanings concerning writing. Field notes for the focus group were held up against these findings additionally coded using previously generated codes to look for aligned occurrences among this group toward understanding their language use. I have conducted analysis by coding for themes and noticing patterns among the data, and I have also conducted discourse analyses (Gee, 2014) to get at the meaning of the language students are using when talking about their own writing and process of learning to write. The unit of analysis is sentence-level utterances made by these students. Stake (1995) says, "Getting the exact words of the respondent is usually not very important, it is what they mean that is important" (p. 66). I would argue, for the purpose of discourse analysis, the exact words are very important to consider the situated meaning of the language; thus, all strands of this study play an important role in the understanding of how these students are constructing meaning surrounding the concept of writing. It has been intriguing to follow those who

consider themselves good writers, middling writers, and poor writers as well as those who like to write and those who do not. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity of participants.

Results And Discussison

In analysing the various transcripts, I found 10 main features of student talk to use in categorizing utterances for analysis of how students construct knowledge and situate their understanding about writing. These features go beyond affirmation, negation, and clarification. Gee (2014) asserts that a discourse analysis requires going beyond a structural, grammatical, or nominal recognition of what is being said; inference and relevance are requirements in order to draw from the language its reflection of a perception of the reality created by speakers, or the figured worlds they create through language (Holland, Skinner, Lachiotte, & Cain, 1998). Rather than codes, discourse analysis in this manner requires searching for features of the talk that occurred in the context of the study. As a result, I began searching for features of talk with regard to the types of language students used to discuss writing. Storytelling: Narrative illustration of a point Francis: I remember this one time, when I was in under graduation, we would just (laughs) just come in and sit there, listening about how to write. I cannot remember more than one or two things I actually wrote.

Relating: Finding and demonstrating connections

Bill: It's like when (pause) you are trying to talk with someone who speaks another language and you just want to talk to them, somehow

Patrick: So writing is like speaking to someone?

Bill: In some ways, yeah Positioning others: Placing individuals into a contextual, social categorization or order

Danielle: I think some kids are like, oh, this is too easy. But, ya know, (pause) it really is not for some of us. I think the teachers like to teach them, but not all of them liketo teach us if we do not get it; it is too hard, I guess.

Positioning self: Placing self into a contextual, social categorization or order Jackie: I'm not a good writer, at all. I want to be, but I'm not

Patrick: Why is that?

Jackie: I just get confused on what I'm trying to say and what they want me to say. It comes out, ya know, (laughs) messed up. I'm not smart enough, I guess

Explaining: Response with deliberate elaboration on a question or topic

Patrick: So what do you mean by not being able to use that?

Tyler: I just don't think I'll use research that much down the road. I'm going to be a mechanic. Not one teacher has been able to show me how I'll really use a research paper to make money.

Confusing: Whether avoidance or uncertainty, noticeable difficulty responding to a question or topic Patrick: Does who you are affect how and what you write?

Gabby: (pause) I'm (pause) I think so? I mean, I am(pause) writing makes me smarter when I do it, so that means it changes me, but I don't really know how to answer that question. I don't write that much, ya know?

Challenging: Using language in a direct stance against an idea or other utterance Anita: I think we are all pretty good writers here Jackie: I don't think I'm a good writer. I don't think anyone would look at my stuff and think I'm good

Reflecting: Consideration of past instances to understand or trouble the present

Ramone: Ya know, I've been thinking about it, and I'm going to be talking to my teachers about writing. I didn't ever really think about bringing it up, but now I'm going to. These features have been used in the analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts. They helped to reveal several themes of the language students used when speaking about writing. When discussing these findings, I have placed feature markers beside relevant parts of the transcripts. Classroom observation yielded data which add to the story and have been included in the discussion as relevant. The features of talk provided a means to group student talk and interactions and understand the ways students responded to thinking about writing. These features suggested patterns in the perceptions of students. These patterns are the source of discussion in this study. Discourse analysis of the student language revealed themes, which responded directly to the initial research questions concerning language, perception, and positioning.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are intriguing and potentially useful in various educational contexts, but they are not completely generalizable. This case is unique, even within the research site, as this study focused only on the undergraduate and not the entire college. More research is needed to understand the complexities of student language use with writing across grade levels. This research is still valuable in the general conversation on writing in colleges and analyzing student language to better understand student perceptions. At the research site, after discussion of findings, teachers have already devised changes to their teaching and new ideas to try out to address new knowledge, including creating a writing plan to tailor their language to support increased ownership and an understanding of growth.

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