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The relevance of Discourse Analysis to the teaching of spoken language.

Introduction

The studies of language teaching have been with us for quite a while and have contributed to form better teachers and better language learners. After all what would be the purpose of all the theories and approaches about language acquisition, syntax, linguistics, etcetera if nothing could be applied to the language classroom? The goal of every teacher must be not to accumulate knowledge only for herself or himself but to be capable to apply what he or she has learned into the classroom in order to help the students to communicate effectively with the language. Studies about discourse analysis are not an exception to this, not only they offer a great opportunity to better understand the language but also offer the students the possibility to master communication beyond the grammar rules, so it is the teachers duty to make discourse analysis matter inside the classroom, Cots (1996) states that “ Bringing discourse analysis into the language classroom cannot be reduced exclusively to the adoption of a series of new categories and analytical techniques.”

This work pretends to share some thoughts on the importance that discourse analysis has on real language teaching, trying to demonstrate that discourse analysis is not just another thing to include in a book but a great tool to enhance students spoken discourse inside and outside the language classroom. To achieve this we will start with a brief reminder of what is discourse analysis, some of its definitions and some of its fields of investigation. Then we will continue with spoken discourse, what is it? What are its functions? This of course will lead us to talk about conversation and its participants as well as the roles of face, politeness, social dexis and phatic communion in day-to-day conversation. Finally all this will help us to obtain a better idea of how the studies of these concepts can improve the teaching of spoken langue inside the classroom.

Discourse Analysis

What is discourse analysis? There are more than one definition and frequently discourse and discourse analysis might have different interpretations depending on the linguistic aspect that is being studied, for example, Schiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton (2001) state that “For many, particularly linguists, “discourse” has generally been defined as “anything beyond the sentence” and McCarthy (1991) mentions that “Discourse analysis is concerned with the study of the relation between language and the context in which it is used”. Yet in both definitions we can identify the importance that it is given not only to the sentence but to what is beyond it or what surrounds it, in other words, the context in which a sentence is said.

So in many ways context is what give a sentence its meaning or change it completely. Baker and Ellece (2011) define context as “An important aspect of many strands of discourse analysis – which helps in the interpretative process of linguistic phenomena as well as providing explanations. An example of this could be the different interpretations of a sentence like “Children make nutritious snacks” such sentence read in a list of children activities for summer camp might have a clear meaning, but what if we read it on a monster’s house for example?

Discourse analysis can centre its attention on different aspects of the same sentence, for example the kind of register that is used, the word order that is chosen or the relation between

the participants on a conversation. Also discourse analysis can centre its attention on written or spoken discourse and for the purpose of this work we will focus on the second one.

Spoken Discourse

The history of human communication is long and intricate but there is something we can all agree on. Spoken language existed before written language. While analysing a written dialogue might not represent a huge challenge for people who are already familiar with this kind of exercises, spoken language can represent a more challenging activity. Thankfully like Carter (1995) says "Perhaps the greatest single event in the history of linguistics was the invention of the tape recorder, which for the first time has captured natural conversation and made it accessible to systematic study." Before this invention trying to analyse spoken discourse represented a huge challenge, specially if we were trying to analyse a natural conversation where asking one of the speakers to repeat a sentence would naturally remove the "natural" aspect of such conversation.

Cameron (2001) states that "When linguists and other social scientists analyse spoken discourse, their aim is to make explicit what normally is taken for granted; it is also to show what talking accomplishes in people's lives and society at large." So in a few words we can say that the role of the analysis of spoken discourse is to better understand some of the choices that people make while communicating, why do they use such register? Why did they use that word order instead of another? Which role are they taking while they talk? And analysing all those components would be way harder if we would not have the possibility to record those conversations using an electronic device.

Approaches to Spoken Discourse

Just like there are different approaches to Discourse Analysis in general, there are also several options to choose from when attempting to analyse the spoken discourse, for example: systemic-functional linguistics, exchange structure theory, conversation analysis, pragmatics and critical discourse theory. (Burns, A., Joyce, H. and Gollin, S. 1996)

Discourse Analysis in the Language Classroom

After all the definitions and approaches that we have reviewed so far, it is time to look at the different ways in which discourse analysis can have an impact on a language class. After all, if the main purpose of discourse analysis is to better understand the choices that are made during the communication process it is natural to try to use such understanding to improve the communicative skills of any language student.

One of the main premises of bringing discourse analysis into the language classroom is also a big shift in paradigms that should result in a better teaching-learning experience. Such premise is to focus on the communicative aspect of language rather than focusing on language itself. It has been a long time since the communicative approach became really popular around the language classrooms in the world, nonetheless, the reality tells us that many teachers who believe to follow the communicative approach still spend a large amount of time of their lessons focusing on grammar rules and structures, and communication falls to a second place. (Cots, J. 1996)

When teachers and students practice discourse analysis they are really focusing on communication and all the parts that give shape to it, like register, context of situation, social interaction, social deixis, among others. Let's analyse one by one how which are these aspects of discourse analysis and what impact do they have in the teaching of the spoken language.

Context of Situation

Halliday and Hasan (1989) define context of situation as "the immediate environment in which a text is actually functioning." They also declare that the context of situation can be analysed in three different components, which are the field of discourse, the tenor of discourse and the mode of discourse, each one of them analysing the context that surrounds a sentence, like who is telling the sentence and its relation with the listener or the role that the language itself is taking in such conversation. How can the inclusion of this concept inside the language class can improve the spoken language of the students? When language students are capable to understand the different meanings that the same word or phrase can have in different situations or "contexts" they acquire the ability to make better choices not only when choosing a register instead of another but they also learn about the differences that can exist when we use a word order, beyond grammar rules this kind of subtle changes can improve drastically their communicative skills.

Deixis and Social Deixis

Let's imagine we are in an English class for foreign students. The teacher writes on the board the following sentence: "There is he again with that on his hands." The students on the class, even those with a better comprehension of the grammar rules might not be able to fully understand what is happening on the sentence. Here is where the concept of deixis makes its appearance. Lyons (as cited in Hensgens, 2005) defines deixis as "the location and identification of persons, objects, events, processes and events being talked about, or referred to, in relation to the spatiotemporal context" Something similar happens with social deixis. Here the students can benefit from a better understanding of how we can refer to the same person by different titles, like, he, mister, gentleman, doctor or simply Carl. A student spoken language will gain a significant boost if he or she is capable of understanding and using appropriately the different forms of deixis in the everyday conversation.

Politeness and Face in the Everyday Conversation

Nobody wants to get involved in a misunderstanding when using a second language, specially if the confusion is threatening the integrity on one of the participants. Imagine an ESL student who is being interrogated by a police in an English speaking country. The way the student answers the questions that he or she is being asked could be as determining as the answers themselves. It is not only necessary that the students know the language in order to give an answer but also that he or she knows the politeness conventions. The role of "face" is also important, Seiwald (2011) defines face as "the self-assumption of a person's own appearance in public, which is determined by defined social features, such as profession, religion, gender, and ethnicity." If students are capable to understand these terms and apply them in their spoken discourse they will avoid face threatening acts and therefore their communicative competence will be improved.

Social Interaction

The concept of social interaction is directly linked to the concepts of face and politeness. It is the way people use language to interact among them. Such interactions can be between different social actors, for example between a teacher and a student, a dentist and a patient, etcetera. The relation that exist between the participants in the conversation will determine many aspects of it, like the level of politeness and face. Many authors even describe the use of language and politeness as a way to gain and maintain the social relationships also as an effective method to ensure that such relations are smooth and harmonious. The goal in other words is to avoid conflict. Students can benefit from this knowledge by understanding the role that these social interactions have in the language's culture that they are acquiring in class while they practice discourse analysis.

Phatic Communication

Another way in which the inclusion of discourse analysis can benefit the spoken language of a student is making them aware of aspects as phatic communication which is described by Baker and Ellece (2011) as "verbal interaction, sometimes called small-talk that is aimed at acknowledging the existence of other people as well as establishing and maintaining rapport among participants in a conversation." An example of this could be as simple as a comment like "nice tie" that a student makes to his or her teacher. Such comment does not imply that the student really likes the tie or that he or she was even paying attention to it, instead we could say that the realm intention of the comment was "to break the ice". If a student who is learning a second language would use it only to communicate what is fundamental he or she would lose a many opportunities to practice and improve their spoken language during this kind of "small-talks" and not only that, but they would also loose the opportunity to improve their social skill which are fundamental in any form of language.

Conclusion

The relevance that discourse analysis has on the language classroom is often minimized. Even when nowadays many schools or language institutions say to follow a communicative approach on their lessons, we can still notice that many language teachers keep focusing the attention on the language and grammar rules of it, instead of redirecting their efforts towards the analysis of the communication. In this work we have reviewed some of the benefits that the inclusion of the discourse analysis has on the students spoken language, aspects like, politeness, face, deixis and context of situation are valuable tools that can improve not just the way the learn the language but specially in the way the perform during spoken dialogues, after all the necessary competences to write and talk are not exactly the same, the circumstances of each are different and thus the skills that are required. When students learn about politeness, face and phatic communion they have lower chances to commit mistakes that are not necessarily linked with the language but with the context that surrounds it. That is as important as grammar specially when we are talking about spoken discourse.

The teaching of the spoken language requires more than grammar rules, it is clear that we can not omit that aspect of language, yet we would make another big mistake if discourse analysis was left behind. The way a teacher decides to include discourse analysis in a class might vary as well as the time that is dedicated to it, fortunately with the continuous professionalization of the language teaching area discourse analysis might increase with time and so the spoken language of thousands of students around the world.

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