

The Importance of Discourse Markers in English Learning and Teaching

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Abstraction—With the wave of development of discourse analysis, more and more linguists and pedagogists begin to apply the research findings and results in this field to language learning and teaching and so far have provided a lot of help. However, whether it is also true for Chinese English learners in using these markers needs further proof. Thus this dissertation aims to investigate into the applicability of DM theory to Chinese teachers and learners in evaluation DMs and the problems they have in learning and using them. Through the analysis on both the qualitative and quantitative results, the research supports and proves the important position of dms in language learning and teaching. It also points out the problems faced by the learners and suggests some possible means for both teachers and students to solve the problems. Later it provides a possible way for the future teaching of dms, which in turn might provide a useful framework for other teaching methods. As a result of the theoretical analysis and the research, the paper concludes that dms do occupy a position in English learning and teaching. It is quite advisable and necessary to pay enough attention to them and try to apply and use them automatically, correctly and appropriately with the help of teachers. Also any over-emphasis on these dms should be avoided against a distraction from the subject matter and together with other methods to facilitate learning process and to bring out a most efficient and effective result in language learning.

Index Terms—discourse analysis, discourse markers, foreign language learning

I. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO DISCOURSE

In the middle of the 20th century, I. Harris and T. F. Mitchell initiated the idea on discourse analysis. And Harris first used the term Discourse Analysis in his book *Discourse Analysis* (1952). Later *The Language of Buying and Selling in Cryenaica* (1957) by Mitchell further developed the theory in a detailed way.

With time passing by, the study of discourse is receiving more and more attention and gradually broadening its category and influence on many aspects. So far its study results have been applied to machine translation, modern stylistics study, language teaching and learning and has brought a great deal of benefits to people in many fields of study.

In spite of the popularity of studying discourse, how to define the term is always a controversy, and different linguists give different definitions according to their own understanding and study focus such as connected speech, (Harris, 1952); the product of an interactive process in a socio-cultural context (Pike, 1954); conversational interaction (Coulthard, 1977); language in context across all forms and modes (Ernean, 1981) and process (Brown and Yule, 1983). But underlying the differences is a common concern for language beyond the boundaries of isolated sentences.

Now the term discourse has entered the vocabulary of many language teachers and applied linguistics. There seems to be fairly broad agreement on its two-core meaning; language in use and the relationships between sentences. Thus the Longman dictionary of Applied Linguistics defines discourse as firstly a general term for examples of language use, i.e. language which has been produced as the result of an act of communication and secondly, in contrast to grammar, which deals with clauses, phrases and sentences, referring to larger units of language such as paragraphs, conversations, and interviews (Richards, Platt and Weber 1985) or the continuous stretches of language longer than a single sentence.

II. WHAT IS DISCOURSE MARKER

The production and comprehension of coherent discourse is an interactive process which requires several different types of knowledge. According to Shiffrin, one type of competence is social and expressive---the ability to use language to display personal and social identities, to perform actions, and to negotiate relationships between self and other. Still other types of competence are cognitive, e.g. the ability to organize conceptual information and to represent it through language, and textual, e.g. the ability to create and understand messages within units of language longer than a single sentence.

1. The definitions of dms

Traditionally, dms are restricted only to speech, as is showed in the following definitions. Dms are:

Linguistic expressions that is used to signal the relation of an utterance to the immediate context with the primary function of bringing to listener's attention a particular kind of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context (Redeker, 1991)

Marking devices which display the speaker's understanding of the contribution's sequential relationship or relevance to the information set as established by the immediately preceding contribution (Goldberg, 1980)

Certain set of signals in the conversationalist's speech, used to introduce level shifts within the conversation, or to prepare listeners for the next run in the logical argument (Keller, 1979)

Expressions which help the speaker divide his message into chunks of information and hence they also help the listener in the process of decoding these information units (Erman, 1986)

Most of the above-mentioned definitions confine dms only to spoken language. According to this view, dms are used to maintain and achieve conversational continuity and seen as response signals and essentially interactive to express the relation or relevance of an utterance to the preceding utterance or to the context. However, as the view about dms is gradually broadened, discourse markers also include more and more items in written language. Vande Kopple (1985) points out that dms are a kind of linguistic items which appear both in spoken and written language and are those items which can help the reader/listeners organize, interpret and evaluate the information.

According to him, we work on two different levels when we speak or write. On one level, we convey information about our subject matter and on the other level, we show listeners/readers how to listen to or read, react to, and evaluate what was spoken or written about the subject matter. As William Vande Kopple explains, the first level is the primary discourse level and the second is the metadiscourse level or dm level.

Thus dms are special linguistic materials through which the speakers step into a text to make their presence felt in the text, to give guidance to an audience as to how the text is organized, what processes are being used to produce it, and what the speaker's intentions and attitudes are regarding the subject matter, the readers, and their text. And they can be realized by various forms such as words, phrases, and clauses. It is usual to find sequences of two or more sentences serving discourse marker purpose, especially in introductions and conclusions to academic texts. Therefore in this these, the dms are as inclusive as involving many language forms, that is words, phrases and clauses.

2. The category/classification of dms

Michael Halliday's functional, pragmatic approach to language helps us understand the concept and classification of dms. He divides the meaning systems of language into three major systems or functions: ideational, interpersonal and textual. This concept of the three functions of language lays the theoretical foundation for dms. The ideational function is concerned with the content of language propositions that are either true or false, and it is representational, referential and informational. The interpersonal function is concerned with establishing and maintaining human relationships and it includes all that may be understood by the expression of our own personalities and personal feelings on the one hand, and the forms of interaction and social interplay with the other participants in the communication situation on the other hand. Here language is used as the mediator: it allows language users to express their personal feelings about the ideational content of their texts and to guide the readers in processing propositional content. The textual function is an enabling function and essential for cohesive texts and for effectively conveying ideational and interpersonal meanings; it makes discourse possible by creating text. It has the function of creating texts, which are distinct from strings of words or isolated sentences and clauses. Based on Halliday's meaning functions, dms can be classified into two broad categories: the interpersonal and textual.

Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffensen (1993) use Vande Kopple's system for dms classification, but modify it in some way. They retains the two major types, textual and interpersonal, but reorganizes their categories into textual dms, consisting of textual markers and interpretative markers and interpersonal dms consisting of Hedges, Certainty markers, attributors, attitude markers and commentary.

3. The functions of dms

So far discourse analysts have proved a number of ways in which discourse markers might contribute to the comprehension of a text.

Some see discourse markers as empty, fulfilling no semantic role. According to this interpretation, the appropriate meaning of dms depends on their surrounding context and the marker itself does not add any meaning, therefore can be deleted from a text without any apparent sacrifice to meaning.

However, in spite of this empty interpretation, they might facilitate comprehension of spoken text by acting as filled pauses, therefore giving listeners more time to process the speech signal and making its segmentation more explicit. And, here these dms fulfill a role similar to punctuation in written text. In this sense, these dms are thus quite helpful to language learners.

In contrast to the empty view of the role of dms in comprehension, Halliday and Hasan, function as anaphoric signals of the semantic relations pertaining between a given clause and its preceding clause. Conjunctives are classified into four groups according to their semantic function: additive and temporal, adversative, causal.

Besides this semantic view of dms, another comes from Schiffrin's analysis of discourse markers in conversation, in which she emphasizes that they may indicate a semantic and pragmatic meaning. For example, the discourse marker *but* conveys both semantic and pragmatic meaning: in terms of semantics, *but* indicates a contrast between the propositional content of an upcoming stretch of talk with the preceding stretch, while in terms of pragmatics it may signal that the speaker is returning to a topic, having diverged.

According to this view which allows for a pragmatic dimension, dms are not seen as simply tying together adjoining clauses but may indicate relations between stretches of text. And this view is becoming more and more popular and

accepted.

However, no matter what view we take towards these dms, they are surely quite helpful and able to facilitate our comprehension of text both spoken and written. As many linguists ever mentioned in the following:

While discourse markers are grammatically optional and semantically empty, they are not pragmatically optional and superfluous: they serve a variety of pragmatic functions. (Brown 1977) If such markers are omitted, the discourse is grammatically acceptable, but would be judged unnatural, awkward, impolite unfriendly or dogmatic within the communicative context (Briton, 1996) creating such a discourse could be incomprehensible for the listener/reader, and mission impossible for the speaker and there would be a great chance of communicative breakdown. (Fraser, 1990).

The following is a set of major functions about dms (Briton, L. 1996)

- a. To initiate discourse, including claiming the attention of the hearer or reader, and to close discourse,
- b. To mark a boundary in discourse, that is, to indicate a new topic a partial shift in topic,
- c. To adopt either new information or old information,
- d. To express a response, subjectively, or to react to the preceding discourse or attitude towards the following discourse,
- e. Interpersonally, to effect cooperation, sharing experiences or intimacy between speaker and hearer, writer and reader, including confirming shared assumptions, checking or expressing understanding, requesting confirmation, expressing deference, or saving face.

The functions of discourse markers may fall into two categories: textual functions of language and interpersonal functions. The two-fold function of dms has practical employment, especially their significance in language learning and teaching.

Firstly, it important for English studies because using it can lead to more effective, efficient speaking and listening, writing and reading or interpreting. Literature teachers can learn new approaches to classics by analyzing their dms use, and writing teachers can learn new rhetorical devices for persuasion.

Secondly, dms are important for teaching reading because it provides benefits for readers with sources for ideas, summaries of thought processes, and mental status, organization of texts, transition guidance of reader expectations, and harmony between writer and reader. Its most important effects on the reader are involvement with and support for an author who cares deeply about the text and the reader and involvement with the text.

Finally, dms are important for teachers in other disciplines because its use can lead to more effective and efficient learning of subject-matter concepts and in technical writing can be presented for needed control structure.

III. STUDIES AND RESEARCH ON DMS

1. Effects of dms on learning

Learning can be said to include two processes: comprehension and production. During the comprehension stage, learners try to get an idea of what to be learned, e.g. the definition, classification, features and structure and try to make out the relevant theory and how it works or functions. This process is fulfilled largely by a great amount of input such as through reading, thinking and teacher's explanation. After contacting with enough language input for a period of time, learners will know the basic and general knowledge of what to be learned. But this doesn't mean that they have acquired everything and been able to use them successfully, especially in language learning. They need to move to the next step, practice, for the final stage of production. For example, although students have been taught the grammar rules, say the present perfect, usually they are still unable to produce correct sentences without enough proactive. Therefore exercises in and out class always play an important role in learning and teaching. Other typical and obvious examples are to speak and write correct and standard English. With speaking and writing as the very production of language learning, it is quite necessary for students to practice an lot before they can turn them out automatically, correctly and appropriately.

Thus, this learning process tells us that understanding dms is one thing and being able to use them is another. To ensure a successful transition from the first comprehension stage to the second production stage, a lot of practices are needed in classroom learning and teaching. For teachers, it is advisable to point out and draw students' attention to these special linguistic items in an appropriate degree through teaching. Teachers may design some relevant exercises such as sentence-completing and sentence-reordering with these dms, correcting students' compositions in or out of class. Especially when they have difficulty to understand the texts because of too many new words or little knowledge about the topic, it is up to teachers to guide them to turn to these dms to draw some clues of general ideas. Therefore teachers are expected to give detailed instruction about the functions and use of these items at right moment and guide students to read model texts with dms and try to find out the difference between those without dms.

For students, they need more exercises to improve the automatic application or employment through reading, writing, speaking and listening more and consciously pay attention to them and at the same time try to perceive the functions and effects brought by dms and learn to view their learning process as a communication with their listeners, speakers, writers and readers, so that they can use these items accurately and appropriately through both their own efforts and with the help of their teachers.

2. Effects of dms on teaching

In another aspect, teaching focus in different stages should be geared according to the English level of English

learners, so that a most efficient and effective result can be achieved both for teaching and learning. Piennemann ever proposed the learnability-hypothesis, that is learners can only benefit from formal classroom teaching if they are psycholinguistically ready for the structures that are being taught. Thus what is learnable by particular learners at a given stage in their development constrains what is teachable. For example, explicitly teaching a structure for which the individual is not yet cognitively ready can not help the individual to jump stages in the developmental sequence. Thus in turn this view may provide evidence for the necessary shift of teaching focus during different learning and teaching stages.

This learnability-hypothese may suggest that teaching should be well arranged and processed according to learners' levels and different leaning stages. For example in terms of the teaching of dms, students of advanced level should be given more chance to try discourse analysis by knowing more about discourse analysis such as discourse structure, discourse style and cohesion and coherence view in language learning, and then students may have a better understanding and employing of dms in their reading and writing. Therefore in order to use dms successfully, advanced teaching of reading and writing should focus more on the learning of discourse organization in order to prevent early fossilization of using dms.

The fact that the seniors, compared with the sophomores, didn't show obvious progress in using dms, besides the lack of practice and attention, may result from the failure of a necessary shift of teaching focus from basic knowledge and simple practice to a more advanced discourse comprehension. For example, students at advanced level should know the essentials about discourse structures, written styles and the techniques such as linguistic and non-linguistic means and the schemata theory in discourse structure to make articles cohesive and coherent. Thus the students' attention is drawn to the skills needed to put knowledge into action and to achieve successful communication and interaction.

3. Ways of teaching and learning dms

Although many linguists through research and studies have reached a general agreement on the importance of dms, how to teach and learn dms most efficiently still needs further research. At present, the lexical approach, or the chunk learning (Nattinger.J and Decarrico, J 1992) might suggest a good way for its learning and teaching. According to the lexical approach, a common characteristic of acquiring language is the progression from routine to pattern to creative use. Thus one method of teaching lexical phrases is to get students to start with a few basic fixed routines, which they then would analyze increasingly variable patterns as they were exposed to more varied phrases. According to this view, there is nothing wrong with memorizing some essential chunks, especially at the beginning stage of language learning, which will surely ease frustration, promote motivation and fluency when learners are unable to construct and use successfully.

More specifically, the lexical approach follow this way: first it is to pattern practice drills which will provide a way of gaining fluency with certain basic fixed routines. Then it is to introduce controlled variation in these basic phrases of simple substitution drills. Next, it is to have students learn to segment and construct new patterns of their own by modeling the analysis done in classroom. Thus the process goes from memorizing some basic and fixed routines to substitution exercises and last to analysis of those variable phrases to find out the construction rules for a full acquisition.

Although dms have their own features and most of their forms are fixed and invariable unlike lexical phrases in the lexical approach, we can still draw some hints from this method, that is, we can learn and teach dms by first viewing the as a special kind of vocabulary. This method may go like this: the first stage is just memorize and recognize the basic and frequently-used dms with the help of teachers who point out and explain these items in texts. Students begin to realize that their existence is somewhat helpful. Then students begin to try using the items they have learned in their speaking and writing. Teachers are supposed to provide timely help by correcting their wrong and inappropriate uses. During this period students are required and encouraged to read more and listen more model materials and try to pay attention to these special items and learn to use them.

Then through constant practice, students are supposed to come to an advanced level to learn and know some knowledge about discourse and discourse analysis such as the important cohesion and coherence view in discourse analysis, discourse structure, and discourse style, which will greatly help them to deal with reading and writing more efficiently as well as to have a better understanding and employing of dms. This stage will help students be able to identify and use dms automatically and successfully, thus further push their learning of dms after the first two periods. During the process, teachers are acting as instructors, correctors, and guides to facilitate students' learning of dms. Of course, it is by no means the only way to learn and teach dms. Other methods may also be able to provide more efficient ways. However, no matter what method is used, the key points are practice and correct guidance in order to ensure a success.

At the same time, not only teachers and students, but also textbook writers, professional writers and publishers all need more awareness of these special linguistic items. Teachers should provide ore classroom opportunities for students to see these items used in various tests and contexts, students also need more classroom opportunities for using it and learning to control its use in various texts and contexts. It is also needed to include these items in comprehensive theories of speaking, writing, reading, interpretation. Language researchers need to design more studies of these items, investigation their various uses and users in various texts and contexts to ensure a successful employment of dms in language learning and teaching.

We may conclude that dms are really helpful in our English learning, bases on the theories and the current research and studies in this field. As Avon Crismore (1989) points out that dms are important for English studies because they can lead to more efficient and effective speaking, listening, writing, reading, interpreting and critical thinking. And in James R. Nattinger and Jeanette S. DeCarrioco's study (1992) they illustrate the possibility and prosperity to apply these linguistic items to an effective teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing. They believe that these special words and expressions will, to certain extent, facilitate students' study, save their time and help them to grasp the main idea and the writer's intention and attitudes more quickly and accurately.

IV. CONCLUSION

The results from the research also support this opinion, dms do occupy a position in English learning and teaching. However, on the other hand, the research also reveals some problems concerning the use of dms: in spite of the students' realization of the importance of dms in language leaning, the students can not use them well in everyday reading and wring, which indicates that more help, guidance and instruction from teachers are needed and in terms of the students, more attention and exercises are necessary in order to obtain the automatic application of these dms. Therefore based on this result, the researcher has provided some suggestions for both teachers and learners of English and I expecting more to come out with further study.

To sum up, it will be a good way to combine the dms approach with other methods to facilitate learning process and ensure a learning success. At the same time another thing which is worth emphasizing is that since over emphasis on dms may distract students from the very subject matter, and lead to a failure in understanding, thus any over emphasis on the learning and teaching of dms should avoided in order to bring out a most efficient and effective result.

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