

## **ESP STUDENTS AS SPOKEN DISCOURSE ANALYSTS – TAKING THE LANGUAGE FROM THE TEXTBOOK AND MAKING IT REAL**

**Abstract:** Having in mind the speech as a primary means of communication, ESP students from the SEE University in Macedonia analyzed spoken English from a native speaker of the language. The idea arose from the fact that in the second language classroom the students have minimal opportunities for interacting with native speakers and are not enough exposed to the language outside of the classroom. The main aim was to prove the fact that casual conversation is neither formless nor unstructured. There are rules that guide everyday speaking. In addition, the emotions conveyed were also analyzed. Students analyzed the language by filling in a questionnaire on verbal communication-fillers, back-channel support, repetition and false starts as well as non-verbal cues – gaze, posture and facial expressions. We did our best at providing close to real authentic environment and this paper will show the process of the analysis, the result and the limitations.

**Key words:** spoken discourse, ESP students, authentic language, native speaker, verbal/non-verbal communication

### **1. Introduction**

One way that teachers can include the study of discourse in the second language classroom is to allow the students themselves to study language, that is, to make them discourse analysts (see Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; McCarthy & Carter, 1987; Riggenbach, 1999).

However interactive the English language classroom is, the students still get minimal opportunities to be exposed to authentic language. In addition, they even get fewer chances of communicating and interacting with native speakers of the language.

It is said that speech is less formal and not guided by rules as writing is. This is maybe due to the fact that spoken language is quicker and not subjected to change as written language is.

As far as the English language goes, the same as in many other language courses, teachers and students in class mainly analyze examples of written language,



usually adapted stories, letters, abridged versions of short stories, excerpts from magazines, adapted online resources, etc. The practice all comes down to variety of written texts. In most cases, teachers do not use samples of spoken language in the classroom, or even less, use an actual speech □ not transcribed, but as it is in its original form □ for analysis. Unfortunately, by doing so, students are unable to recognize different features □ verbal and non-verbal components of speech that they use it in everyday life, without even noticing.

The primary idea of this analysis was to take the language out of the textbook and make it more tangible, more real and concrete so that students can work with it and not just see it as a grammatical unit. We also wanted to analyze the features that characterize non-verbal communication that is complementary to everybody's speech.

The analysis was done by second year students (10 in total) who study Business Informatics at South East European University (the location in Skopje) in Macedonia and have English for Specific Purposes 1&2 in their third and fourth semester. The guest speaker was the owner of an original American bakery and sweet shop located in the old bazaar in Skopje, Mr. Bryan Brenchley. He voluntarily agreed to be recorded during his lecture and he himself chose the topic and the pace of the presentation.

## 2. Literature review

We communicate everyday to express ourselves and exchange ideas. It is „the most basic and widespread linguistic means of conducting human affairs“ (McArthur cited in Pridham, 2001: 1).

Speech, which is the primary and universal method of communication, plays a far more important role in our lives than the other way, writing. This is probably because most people speak much more than they write. Besides, almost everyone learns to speak, but not necessarily to write. Therefore, the importance of speaking leads us to think how people communicate with each other by talking.

When it comes to the discourse of the English language classroom, the linguistic structure of classroom discourse differs in some respects from that of casual conversation. Moreover, this applies for every other language classroom, not just an English one.

Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) among others have shown that classroom discourse has, by nature, a triple structure: the teacher initiates, the pupil responds, the teacher then evaluates the response.

The original purpose of Sinclair and Coulthard's analysis of the language used by pupils and teachers, begun in the early seventies, was to try to find a general model for discourse analysis, in other words for the study of the „way in which units above the rank of clause and sentence are related and patterned and the way in which such language functions as question and command are realized through grammatical structure and position in discourse“ (1975: 8). The classroom for them, then, was a means to an end not an end in itself.

McCarthy clearly explains that „discourse analysis is concerned with the study of the relationship between language and the contexts in which is used“ (1994: 5). In addition, Aitchison has written that „when we use language, we do not necessarily do so in a random and unconstructed way. Both conversation and written texts have various devices for welding together miscellaneous utterances into a cohesive whole“ (1992: 2).

Sacks emphasizes that conversational analysis is „a first step towards achieving a naturalistic observational discipline to deal with details of social interaction in a rigorous, empirical and formal way“ (cited in Coulthard, 1994: 59).

Discourse analysis depends on many components of the language. McCarthy argues that „discourse analysis is not entirely separate from the study of grammar and phonology, but discourse analysts are interested in a lot more than linguistic forms“ (1994: 9). This, in other words, means that discourse analysts focus on the usage of different language functions in order to establish oral communication rather than focusing on the grammatical aspects of the language (1994: 3).

Brown and Yule state that „the speaker has available to him the full range of ‘voice quality’ effects (as well as facial expressions, postural, and gestural systems). Armed with these he can always override the effect of the words he speaks“ (1983: 4). When the analysts record a lecture for example, they can clearly observe how those features reinforce meaning.

Nonverbal communication is the process of using wordless messages to generate meaning. Nonverbal communication includes non word vocalizations such as inflection and non word sounds such as „ah“ and „hmm“. We cannot quantify the relative contribution of nonverbal communication to verbal communication (Lapakko, 1997), but nonverbal communication often provides much more meaning than people realize.

Nonverbal communication can complement, repeat, contradict, regulate, replace, or accentuate our verbal and vocal messages. It is a known fact that actions speak louder than words, and sometimes what is not said is more important than what is said.

There are additional explanations of the importance of nonverbal messages. In *Silent Messages*, Dr. Albert Mehrabian analyzed the messages people send. He divided messages into three parts □ verbal, vocal, and nonverbal. The verbal part includes the actual words we use in a message. The vocal part is the tone or inflection we place on those words. The entire message changes if we use a sarcastic tone rather than a sincere tone. The nonverbal part of the message includes the physical aspects □ facial expressions, gestures, posture, eye contact □ that are used. Nonverbal communications are important because Dr. Mehrabian estimates that 7 percent of a message is verbal and 38 percent is vocal. That means that 55 percent is nonverbal, and it contributes to each message in a number of ways (Mehrabian, 1971).

### 3. The setting and the methodology

The first step in analyzing some of the features in a spoken text is to record an example of natural and spontaneous speech in an authentic environment. The word text can be defined as any type of linguistic or non-linguistic communication that can be interpreted in some way. In this case, we going to use the definition of text given by Brown (1991: 11), that is, a text is „a verbal record of a communicative act“.

Any spoken discourse analysis starts with transcription of the recorded data. However, the actual discourse analysis does not start after the transcription but before it, because choosing who, when and how to record are all inevitable parts of the process. They are as important as the actual analysis is.

ESP students at South East European University in Macedonia have clinical teaching in their syllabus. That basically means an opportunity to listen to native speakers of the English language in their authentic environment. This is indeed a rare opportunity for the students to be able to hear natural English language outside the formality of the classroom.

For the need of this analysis we organized a presentation delivered by the co-owner of the first American bakery and sweet shop K8, located in the Old Bazaar in Skopje. The co-owner has lived in Macedonia for nearly 13 years and before that he worked for Apple in California, USA for 10 years. Apart from English, which is his mother tongue, he also speaks Macedonian and Albanian fluently. He voluntarily agreed to be recorded, and he chose the topic of his presentation. The ESP students are studying business informatics, and he thought that an interactive presentation on the Apple working experience would be both challenging and interesting for them. Also, he wanted to start on a personal note by introducing his family and telling the students where each member of the family is right now and what do they do.

We previously agreed to record the beginning of the presentation and stop somewhere in the middle. The whole presentation was about 60 minutes long and we had a recorded data of about 20 minutes, which, according to my presumptions had enough material for analysis.

However, when I watched the material I realized that it was too long for an analysis done in class, so I decided to pick a short excerpt, 5 minutes long, which was full with verbal and non-verbal features.

The ESP students study English as part of their syllabus, but they had never had any training in discourse analysis or had ever come across the concept of discourse analysis. That is why transcription was a big obstacle that we needed to overcome. When you prepare a transcription for recorded data, you need to acknowledge the audience and the purpose of the transcription. In our case, the audience were ESP students who never did or heard of transcription and discourse analysis.

What we did to overcome this problem was we agreed to watch and listen to the recorded video in class and pause after each minute and try to fill in a questionnaire prepared by the teacher previously. After that I transcribed the recorded data, we compared the answers on the questionnaires.

The reason we decided to do this was that the students also analyzed the non-verbal features of the presenter and that is something impossible to transcribe.

As we will see in the end, this set up worked perfectly fine.

### 3.1. Analyzing the recorded data

As mentioned before, ESP students analyzed the recorded presentation by filling in a questionnaire which consisted of the following questions regarding both verbal and non-verbal communication features:

1. Back-channel support – identify examples and frequency;
2. Fillers – identify examples and frequency;
3. Discourse markers – identify examples and frequency;
4. Intensifiers – identify examples and frequency;
5. Posture – comment on the leg and arm position and body orientation;
6. Facial expressions – comment on the emotions conveyed and the eye contact.

The first four features of the analysis were selected in class after we had a class of formal introduction to a discourse analysis and after students agreed that they will be the simplest for them to analyze. Having in mind that they have never done this previously, I didn't insist on adding other features as well.

Backchannels are the brief verbal responses that a listener uses while another individual is talking, such as mm-hmm, ok, yeah, and oh wow. Listener response can also be non-verbal, for instance head nods. Head nods are vital for conversational maintenance and management (McClave, 2000) and often function as a form of 'back-channel' (Yngve, 1970), that is, a 'mechanism used for feedback' in discourse (Allwood et al., 1992).

Filled pauses refer to those small „sounds like um, er, ah, like, you know, know what I mean. They can give the speaker time to think what they are going to say next and as a result, many false starts and changes in grammatical structure may occur in informal language. According to Beattie, filled pauses can also protect the speaker from interruption for a short while“ (Beattie, 1977 cited in Graddol et al., 1994: 172).

Speakers will use spoken discourse markers to fill out their utterances when they do not really know what they want to say, or have nothing of substance to say. For this reason, spoken discourse markers may share one same purpose with filled pauses, which is to buy time to think what the speaker is going to say next. The difference between the two is that the former is used at the beginning of a turn, while the latter usually occur during an utterance □ so, like, well, OK, I mean, actually, because. Discourse markers are used for marking information that is new to the discourse or marking the start of a new topic, checking that the listener is following, creating solidarity with the listener and appealing to the listener for understanding.

Intensifiers are words like *very* or *really* that occur before an adjective or an adverb and boost the strength of its meaning (*very fast, really delicious, well funny*). Young people often choose intensifiers that are different from those used by older generations, so intensifiers tend to fall in and out of fashion in spoken language.



Nonverbal communication is the use of gestures, facial expressions, and other non-audible expressions to transmit a message. We use these non-communication features in everyday life without even noticing.

For example, the face is the most expressive area for nonverbal communications, and we spend a great amount of time looking at it during a discussion. The wide variety of emotions expressed through the face is a part of everyone's repertoire.

During the analysis, students also wanted to check the hypothesis that Americans generally give more eye contact when listening than talking. In other words, a speaker only glances at the listener, while the polite listener looks at the speaker's eyes or face.

### 3.2. The result and the limitations

It must be pointed out that with limited listening and cultural comprehension of the English language from the viewpoint of a non-native speaker, an analysis like this will not be able to precisely explore the features of spoken discourse. It can merely serve as an exercise in removing language from the textbooks and making it tangible so that students can explore language as interaction and not just as a grammatical unit.

One of the principal limitations of the analysis was the authenticity of the setting. We did our best in providing nearly authentic environment, nothing resembling a classroom-like lecture, and the pace and the tone set were adequate. Nevertheless, it was still a previously prepared presentation, and it lacked the spontaneity and naturalness of an informal speech at times.

However, given the fact that this was a completely new thing for the students, the results were more than positive and encouraging.

As mentioned previously, the set-up we chose for the analyses worked fine with the students. Given the circumstances and the fact that they don't study English language, but have ESP as part of their syllabus, a full transcription for the recorded data was undoable. Instead we just put on paper what the presenter said and identified the verbal features that were chosen for analysis. Afterwards, the students watched the video and identified the non-verbal features that proved to be more interesting to them.

The video recording was of high quality and the place where the camera was put was unobtrusive and we could clearly see and listen to the presenter.

Additionally, when we watched and listened to the recording in class we had extra speakers so that the students could have no trouble listening and identifying what they are asked to.

As far as the first question goes, when we decided what to include in the analysis, back-channeling seemed like a good idea. But, when we watched the video, we could only see two students listening to the presenter, and the other eight were in the far back. As a result, based on the reactions on the two listeners, students concluded that they used head nods and words like 'mm-hmm', 'yeah' to show that they follow the presentation.

The second part of the analysis was identifying the frequency of the fillers in the presentation. The students concluded that the most frequent filler that the presenter used was 'um', followed by 'er' and 'you know'. The following example proves that:

My oldest daughter is a ballerina, OK (*ballet dancing moves*).  
She studied here at MOB, er, Macedonian ballet um school (*hand pointing at MOB*).  
For eight years she studied there.  
And she is continuing professional um umum track with ballet.  
In a University where she is um learning everything about ballet and dancing.

The third question referred to finding examples of discourse markers usually used to start a new utterance. One discourse marker that appeared numerous times in the presenter's speech was 'OK'. He also used 'like' and 'I mean'. The students pointed out that sometimes there was an overuse of the discourse marker 'OK'. This is probably feature of this particular speaker of the English language, although, generally, Americans tend to overuse words such as 'OK' and 'like' in their everyday speech. Here is a short example on the use of the discourse markers:

Let's getpersonal, OK?  
I've lived in Macedonia, OK, for 13 years, OK?  
My oldest daughter is a ballerina, OK

The next question in the analysis referred to the use of intensifiers. This is where we were left shorthanded because the presenter used only 'very' a couple of times.

I have been married for um 30 years.  
My youngest son wants to be a pilot, OK?  
He is very interested in um planes.

The fifth part of the analysis focused on two aspects of the non-verbal communication. The first feature that students observed was the posture, i.e. the presenter's arm and leg position and his body orientation. It was clear from the video that he was facing towards the students with little to no movement at all. He only used his arms for demonstrating and emphasizing what he previously talked about.

Ex. Maybe, maybe she'll dance in a company (*touching his face*).  
Maybe she'll open her own dance studio.  
Maybe she'll start a new dance company.  
All these things.  
And my second daughter is a musician (*playing piano in the air*).  
She is a pianist.  
And she studied piano here.  
And she continued that over there (*hand pointing towards USA*).  
So, ah, so, ah, I like to say I've learned Macedonian (*uneasily moving the arms*).  
And I'm still learning Macedonian, right, OK? (*head nodding*).  
Um, you've learned English.  
And you still learning English, right?



As far as the last feature in the analysis goes, the students had to observe his emotions during the presentation and the eye contact. They agreed that on the whole, his speech was not very expressive, bland and ordinary at times and that there was equal eye contact with the listeners.

However, we didn't support the thesis that Americans only glance at their listeners and don't give them a lot of eye contact. He used the eye contact a lot to make sure that everyone was following and also to appeal for understanding. This is most probably due to the fact that this was a lesson previously organized and shaped, only performed outside the classroom. If it was a natural conversation outside the educational boundaries the result might have been completely different.

Done as it was in class, analysis of this kind has its own limitations and restrictions. First of all, as we mentioned numerous times, it was first of its kind of analysis for the students, although they have studied English for nearly 12 years (from primary to University level). Having this in mind, the whole process turned out to be highly motivating for them, since they have learned something new and have been exposed to different aspects of the English language, not just that used in class.

Secondly, the analysis gave them a new perspective on what the language is consisted of and they have never been aware of that. Maybe, if they have been trained in doing a discourse analysis the whole outcome would have been different in terms of choosing different features to analyze and doing the transcriptions following the rules of discourse transcription.

It the end, for a better result next time, an analysis of this kind can be made by students studying English language who will record a spontaneous talk between English speaking people outside the classroom. This way we can ensure that the analysis is properly done, having in mind the fact that such students probably have discourse study in their syllabus.

#### 4. Conclusion

Natural language is an embodied phenomenon and a deeper understanding of the relationship between talk and bodily actions, particular gestures, is required if we are to develop more coherent understandings of the collaborative organization of communication (Saferstein, 2004).

Casual conversation or informal speech is neither formless nor unstructured. On the contrary, rules and features definitely exist, which can guide people's everyday speaking. So we may either use a variety of verbal communication, such as filled pauses, back-channel support, spoken discourse markers as well as filled pauses or use non-verbal cues as well, such as gaze, facial expressions, and posture to get what we want to say across.

Speeches, both formal and informal, are more or less organized and structured even though they are quick and evanescent. Besides, they are extremely important for survival and effective functioning in society. Hence, from the viewpoint of learners and teachers, we should attach more importance to the rules and functions



of spoken discourse, in order to benefit ourselves from both language learning and teaching (Zhang, 2010).

Learners should also be exposed to real texts rather than traditional or fixed written or oral texts that lack □ in some cases □ idiomatic expressions and discourse fillers. Therefore, the field of discourse analysis provides instructors with key tools in order to show learners how spoken language works in authentic contexts.

The speech that we chose to analyze, although done outside of the classroom setting, still proved to be heavily burdened with educational boundaries. Having this in mind, students need to be firstly prepared for a discourse analysis and then let go in the real world in search for an authentic speech.

This was probably one of the reasons why students thought that non-verbal communication was more interesting to analyze.

Nevertheless, with all its flaws and strengths it is highly recommend that such a discourse analysis is done as an integral part of the syllabus of students who have higher levels of English, but do not necessarily study English. It enables them to see the language from a different perspective and it makes them more aware of the rules that guide our everyday speaking.

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## **STUDENTI ENGLESKOG JEZIKA ZA POSEBNE NAMENE KAO ANALITIČARI GOVORNOG JEZIKA – JEZIK IZ UDŽBENIKA U REALNOJ DISKURSNOJ SITUACIJI**

### Rezime

Imajući u vidu govor kao osnovno sredstvo komunikacije, studenti engleskog jezika za posebne namene sa Univerziteta SEE u Makedoniji analizirali su jezik govornika čiji je maternji jezik engleski. Ova ideja proizašla je iz činjenice da prilikom učenja drugog stranog jezika studenti imaju jako malo prilika za interakciju sa govornicima kojima je dati strani jezik maternji i nisu dovoljno izloženi tom jeziku izvan okvira učionice. Glavni cilj bio je dokazati činjenicu da svakodnevni razgovor poseduje i formu i strukturu. Postoje pravila po kojima se odvija svakodnevna konverzacija. Pored toga, emocije nastale tokom razgovora takođe su analizirane. Studenti su analizirali jezik tako što su popunjavali upitnik o verbalnoj komunikaciji: veznike, reakcije sagovornika, ponavljanja i lažne početke, kao i neverbalne informacije: pogled, držanje i facijalne ekspresije. Maksimalno smo se potrudili da stvorimo okruženje koje bi odgovaralo realnoj situaciji i ovaj rad će pokazati tok analize, rezultate i ograničenja.

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