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DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVE IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES COURSE DESIGN

Abstract: Tertiary education is faced with a continuously growing need for ESP courses that are no longer restricted to teaching and learning field specific vocabulary only. Today's tailor-made, learner-focused ESP courses are expected to prepare students for future professional communication and equip students with transferable skills, perceived as necessary for their area of expertise, which will increase their mobility and enhance their career prospects. This changed learning/ teaching setting requires redefining the traditional roles of teachers, learners and materials. This paper accepts the premise that discourse approach to ESP course and syllabus design is a prerequisite for redefining the roles and promoting autonomous language learning.

The paper briefly presents the most frequent, traditional definitions of the terms 'discourse' and 'discourse analysis'. This paper also reviews current literature related to ESP course design in order to provide an insight into the most important features of ESP course and syllabus design. Moreover, the article tackles the notion of conducting effective pre-course needs assessment as well as end-of-course evaluation. Another essential issue addressed in this paper is training and engaging not only ESP teachers, but also ESP students in discourse analysis.

Key words: discourse, discourse analysis, ESP course design, communicative competence, learner autonomy

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to offer insights into the nature and the main features of a discourse oriented ESP syllabus. It opens with the most frequently quoted definitions of discourse followed by a number of ways in which discourse can be classified. It briefly defines discourse analysis and review sits study fields which are most relevant to language teaching. The paper then proceeds with defining what ESP is and is not and elaborates on the reasons for discourse perspective in ESP.

The paper accepts the premise that discourse approach to ESP course and syllabus design is a prerequisite for redefining the roles of students, teachers and teaching materials and consequently promoting autonomous language learning.

2. Defining and classifying discourse

Celce-Murcia & Olshtain (2000) point out that the two types of definitions, formal and functional, traditionally given for the term 'discourse' are both deficient. According to the formal definition, discourse is „a unit of coherent language consisting of more than one sentence" whereas the functional definition considers discourse as „language in use". A sentence is not a relevant notion in defining discourse since discourse in a certain context can consist of a single word only. Similarly, „language in use" is too general to define discourse. They consider the combination of the two aspects the best definition of discourse: „A piece of discourse is an instance of spoken or written language that has describable internal relationships of form and meaning (e.g. words, structures, cohesion) that relate coherently to an external communicative function or purpose and a given audience/interlocutor" (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000: 4).They also define discourse simply as „the language forms that are produced and interpreted as people communicate with each other" (Celce- Murcia & Olshtain, 2000: 2).

Cook (1989: 6) differentiates between two kinds of language as objects for study: „artificially constructed" or „abstracted" language which serves to teach the rules of how a language works or to teach literacy and „language in use" or „language for communicating something that is felt to be coherent… corresponding to a correct sentence or a series of correct sentences". Cook defines the latter as discourseand notices that discourse often has grammatical mistakes in it and „treats grammar rules as a resource". Based on the specific need, sometimes it follows the rules of grammar and other times it departs from them. According to him, what counts for discourse is not the length but the fact that it communicates a message that is recognized by the receivers.

Celce-Murcia & Olshtain (2000) list a number of ways in which discourse can be classified. The basic distinction is between **written** and **spoken** texts which can both be further categorized on basis of **register,** or the level of formality, and **genre**, or the communicative purpose, audience, style and format. A discourse can be **monologic**, produced by a single speaker or writer with little or no interaction, or **dialogic**, when two or more participants interact. Another distinction is between **planned** or **context-reduced** and **unplanned** or **context-embedded** discourse. ESP learners as more proficient speakers of the language are expected to flexibly and appropriately interpret and produce both context-reduced and context-embedded discourse. Another classification of discourse is as **transactional** used for transmission of information and **interactional** for maintaining social relationships and expressing attitudes.

3. Defining discourse analysis

The term 'discourse analysis' was coined by Zellig Harris, a linguist who initiated a search for language rules that would explain how sentences were connected within a text. Discourse analysis is defined as „the study of language in use that extends beyond sentence boundaries" (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000: 4); „the

search for what gives discourse coherence" (Cook, 1989: 6) or „the examination of how stretches of language, considered in their full textual, social, and psychological context, become meaningful and unified for their users" (Cook, 1989: ix). The latter definition given by Cook highlights the great importance of discourse analysis to language teachers since it provides insights into various issues of language use and learning. Language teaching and learning are still mainly focused on the sentence. Knowing what makes a correct sentence, where it ends, etc. is useful but not enough for communication. Cook (1989) points out that there is more to using a language and communicating successfully than producing correct sentences. Moreover, people can communicate successfully without speaking or writing in completing sentences.

Celce-Murcia & Olshtain (2000) note that there is no one simple definition of discourse analysis which encompasses at least six different approaches □ speech act theory; interactional sociolinguistics; ethnography of communication; pragmatics; conversation analysis and variation analysis. They also point out that even though discourse analysis is a well-defined discipline, its close relations with a number of disciplines turn it into the umbrella term for various issues dealt with in the linguistic study of text and discourse. Similarly, McCarthy (1991) claims that „discourse analysis has grown into a wide-ranging and heterogeneous discipline which finds its unity in the description of language above the sentence and an interest in the contexts and cultural influences which affect language in use" (1991: 7).

Johnstone (2008) points out that discourse analysis has been used in answering all sorts of questions, some of which are language related. According to her, analyzing discourse is in fact „examining aspects of the structure and function of language in use" (2008: 4) and „looking at actual stretches of connected text or transcript or talk and providing descriptions of the structure of paragraphs, stories, and conversations" (2008: 6), which is, in fact, moving the description of structure above the interest in morphology and syntax.

Discourse analysis has a practical relevance to language learning and teaching. Among the many fields of study within discourse analysis, the following could be considered the most relevant to language teaching: *cohesion* □ the use of cohesive ties to explicitly link together all the propositions in a text; *coherence* □ unity of a discourse based on individual sentences or utterances related to each other which leads to easier and more effective interpretation of a text or the quality of being meaningful and unified; *information structure* □ presentation of old or known information i.e. *theme/ topic* versus new or unknown information i.e. *theme/comment*; and *conversation analysis* □ turn-taking and conventions about opening and closing conversations, length of speech, interrupting, changing topics, pauses, etc.. Yaldenreminds that „analysis of cohesion and coherence in scientific and technical texts has contributed considerably to course design for specific-purpose groups" (1987: 45).

Celce-Murcia & Olshtainargue that discourse analysis has had a very important impact on syllabus design. This approach places social context of learning and language use at the center. They also point out that „the field of discourse analysis plays a key role in the definition of goals by placing emphasis on the learners' communicative needs, which entails social and cultural perspectives in addition to the linguistic elements of the curriculum" (2000: 186).

4. ESP with a discourse perspective

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) consider ESP not as a product, a particular kind of methodology, or a particular kind of teaching material; but as an approach to language learning and teaching directed by specific needs and reasons for learning. According to them, what distinguishes ESP from General English is not the need itself but the awareness of the need. Every ESP course should be based on the question: Why does this particular learner need to learn the foreign language?

In most cases, ESP teachers are expected to design a course that would meet the specific needs of a particular group of learners. Designing an ESP course begins by asking and answering a set of questions which create the basis for designing a syllabus, writing or adapting teaching materials, specifying classroom teaching, and determining the form of evaluation. In order to design an ESP course, the teacher needs to know *why* □ the reasons for learning the language; *who* □ stakeholders involved in the process; *where* □ the potentials and limitations of the place where the learning is going to happen; *when* □ time the learning is going to happen as well as available time; *what* □ aspects of the language, proficiency level, topic areas; and *how* □ methodology employed. Setting up a new course and creating a syllabus for it implies blending what is already known with the new elements brought to the classroom by each new learner in terms of needs, wants, beliefs, attitudes, etc. Dudley-Evans and St John consider needs analysis „the corner stone of ESP which leads to a very focused course" (1998: 122) whereas Nunan considers needs analysis as „a family of procedures for gathering information about learners and about communication tasks for use in syllabus design" (1999: 75). Needs analysis should help the teacher get a clear picture of what the learners want to learn and how they want to learn it. In my personal experience, since groups always tend to be mixed abilities, learners seem to favour an eclectic or 'mixed' approach to instruction.

Apart from the fact that discourse as an integral part of communicative competence can no longer be ignored in ESP courses, which are expected to prepare students for effective future professional communication, there are a number of additional reasons why discourse perspective is needed in each ESP course. ESP courses should prepare students to be able to handle language which is not idealized, but a language which is in real use. With a discourse perspective, the focus changesfrom grammar and language analysis to discourse and language for communication. Moreover, in an ESP course with a discourse perspective, students are given a chance to explore language asinteraction, not as a set of grammatical units. Next, a discourse perspective draws attention to the skills needed to put the knowledge in grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation into action and communicate successfully. In addition, when a discourse perspective is given to an ESP course and greater attention is paid to structure and process of discourse, learners improve both their productive and receptive skills. Through a discourse perspective, learners get accustomed to examining the general discourse features, *top-down*, before the specific text features, *bottom-up*. In other words, they learn that the general features provide a context and an explanation for the use of specific forms. Another reason

why discourse perspective should be applied to an ESP course design is that learners develop metalinguistic awareness which is very useful for critically analyzing their own speech and writing as well as the speech and writing of others. What is probably most important in the long run is that a discourse based ESP course helps students become autonomous, life-long language learners and at the same time helps teachers become reflective researchers. Since all the other components of communicative competence □ linguistic, sociolinguistic, and strategic □ can be observed and assessed through discourse, it becomes the central competency where everything else comes together.

The English language lectors at the Language Centre at South East European University are not consumers of ready-made syllabi. They are given the freedom and responsibility to design, implement, evaluate, modify and adapt their own syllabi. Therefore, they need to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills for syllabus development.

5. Main features of a discourse oriented syllabus

A discourse based syllabus needs to combine *content □ what* is to be included in the course, *process □ how* learning and teaching are to be implemented, and *product □ what* should be achieved, with the context in which the learning takes place □ *where* the syllabus is going to be implemented.

As part of the content domain, Celce-Murcia & Olshtain (2000) emphasize *contextualization, i.*e. „the need to present linguistic content within thematic and situational contexts that reflect the natural use of language"; *authenticity,* i.e. „… the type of language used in the classroom or during the learning process, and the tasks employed while learning the language"; and *integration,* i.e. „consolidation of background knowledge and language skill use". With reference to authenticity, teachers have to be careful not to insist on using authentic materials intended for native speakers of the target language without taking into consideration the learners' real needs and their proficiency level. Otherwise they run the risk of learners not being able to follow. In order to be authentic, every task used should be relevant and appropriate to the learning situation. In order to create an authentic learning situation, both teachers and learners need to bear in mind that in authentic or natural use of language, there isn't only one right answer. Learners should be encouraged to give real answers.

Within the process domain, the most important principles for the learning process form the learners' perspective and principles for the teaching process from the teacher's perspective should be established. Celce-Murcia & Olshtain (2000) emphasize *metacognitive orientation*, aimed at student autonomy and responsibility,and the *feedback-focused approach* as the most important principles within the process domain. With reference to feedback, they distinguish between *linguistic feedback*, „a reaction to a learner's production of a language □ either by repetition, correction, or incorporation/reformulation. This is the kind of feedback

a hearer provides for the speaker when the speech produced was consistent or inconsistent with linguistic norms (positive feedback reinforces what was said while negative feedback tells the speaker that there is some discrepancy that needs to be corrected)" and *performance feedback*, „evaluation a learner receives while using the language". This kind of feedback is how the teachers react to students' work in general and how the students themselves evaluate their success in carrying out an activity in the foreign language. In most cases both language and content will be evaluated.

The product domain clearly specifies the expected outcomes of a successfully completed course, whereas the context dimension offers recommendations for the specific learning situation.

> „A syllabus design with a discourse perspective, regardless whether it is content, process or product oriented, needs to possess the following two features: focus on authentic texts and interactional communicative events in language use, and focus on the social and cultural environment within which language processing and interaction take place. Its goals would need to combine ….language knowledge, sociocultural knowledge, and pragmatic knowledge together with processing skills leading to an interactionist perspective of language use. Learners, in other words, would be expected to be able to use language in specified interactional contexts." (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000: 190).

When developing an ESP syllabus from a discourse perspective, the pre-course needs analysis has to be accompanied by a careful analysis of the particular linguistic context in which the syllabus is to be implemented. End-of-course assessment and evaluation should also be conducted in order to find out what learners have learnt and what they have failed to learn in relation to what had been planned. Additionally, the researcher might find out whether the studentslearned anything that had not been planned. Yalden observes that „there always will remain a variety of puzzling questions about why things turn out the way they do, and what can be done to improve, modify, or rectify the situation" (1987: 3).

The materials and texts, spoken and written, for an ESP course with a discourse perspective are selected on basis of discourse features and levels of complexity while the teaching methodology and learning activities are guided by communicative goals.

As specified in the above quote, the goals of a discourse-oriented syllabus are a combination of knowledge and processing skills.

Another distinctive feature of a discourse oriented ESP course is that performance in discourse is assessed alongside performance in grammar and vocabulary. This is very important because students' ability to produce and interpret language cannot be tested with multiple-choice grammar and vocabulary questions only. In order to assess discourse, teachers should use a variety of elicitation techniques and assessment procedures such as self and peer assessment; observations; narratives; portfolios; interviews, diaries; checklists; debates; role plays, etc.. The advantage of these assessment tools is that they allow for elicitation of a discourse in a more natural way without the testing pressure and anxiety. The assessment tools used

should be fully compatible with the specifications listed in the syllabus that need to be developed.

Students' discourse competence should be assessed because their performance on the four skills □ listening, reading, speaking and writing □ largely depends on their discourse knowledge.

With reference to discourse-sensitive feedback, according to Celce-Murcia & Olshtain (2000), there are two approaches to error correction in a discourse oriented ESP syllabus: *interview analysis* for correction of oral discourse and *reformulation* for correction of written discourse. In interview analysis, the teacher records an extended conversation with the learner which is then transcribed. The transcription, which is used as material for error correction, is read by the learner and corrected with the teacher's help. Not all mistakes are corrected. The focus is on inaccuracies which alter the meaning the learner is trying to convey. Inreformulation, a paragraph written by a student is rewritten by the teacher in order to make it more natural and accurate. The overall organization, grammar, spelling, word choice, word order are changed but the original meaning is preserved. The learner then compares the original and the rewritten version trying to understand why each change was made. Both approaches are time-consuming and in practice would need adaptation. Although assessment conferences of this type are time consuming, they should be regular practice of each ESP course. When conferencing, each individual student should obtain feedback on performance and a diagnostic profile clearly indicating his/her strengths and weaknesses as well as recommendations for improvement. As part of each ESP course offered by the Language Centre at the South East European University, at least three conferences per semester are a regular practice of each ESP course. The initial conferencing session is held at the beginning of semester. It serves primarily to establish a relationship between the teacher and the student(s) and set general and personal goals and objectives. The second conferencing session takes place sometime in the middle of semester. During this session student(s) progress is discussed and assessed and at the same time advice is offered. The third conferencing session is reserved for the end of the semester when student' achievements during the course are outlined and advice on future study of the language are offered.

In a syllabus designed from a discourse perspective, learners are not only exposed to a variety of discourse types and genres but also encouraged to produce a variety of discourse types and genres. When assessing students' proficiency level, it is necessary to include as many different discourse types as possible.

In an ESP course with a discourse perspective, discourse analysis is applied for analysing the features of both the teacher's and students' discourse. With the students' consent, the teacher records the classroom teaching or individual conferencing sessions and analyses it in many different ways. For instance, the teacher could analyse his/her discourse with reference to the following aspects: the ratio of teacher talking time versus student talking time; the types of questions asked □ *referential* or real questions to which the teacher does not know the answer and *display* questions to which the teacher already knows the answer; rate of speaking □ fast or slow; response time given to students; ways of checking students understanding; clarifying

when students did not understand; rate of offering positive reinforcement; and ways of correction, including encouragingself-correction. This helps the teacher become a reflective observer of his/her own teaching and ensure that his/her talk in class supports and enhances learning.

Similarly, students' discourse could be analysed. Since there is a lot of group and pair work in ESP courses, with student consent, the teacher records the students' performance as they work in groups or pairs. The recording is then transcribed and given to the same or a different group for analysis and possibly for correction of inaccuracies. This trains students to attend to discourse and critically analyse the speech they produce as well as the speech others produce.

6. Redefining roles

In an ESP course with a discourse perspective, the traditional roles of students, teacher and teaching materials are put in question and the whole nature of foreign language teaching and learning is being re-examined and redefined. Language learning through discourse results in autonomous language leaning.

Students assume an active role and develop greater awareness of the language learning process. They become aware of their preferred learning style as well as the various learning strategies they can take advantage of and eventually develop into autonomous language learners. They are no longer passive recipients only, but take part in decision-making, initiate learning activities themselves, and self-evaluate their progress. As a result, they take greater responsibility for their learning. Becoming a successful language learner requires learner training which encompasses training students to attend to discourse and context alongside the training in grammar and vocabulary. Celce-Murcia & Olshtain point out that „the discourse approach to language learning is compatible with an emphasis on individual learning strategies since it allows for the varied ways in which learners interpret meaning in context and build upon such experiences for use in future communications" (2000: 229).

The teacher ceases to be the central authority figure and the main decision maker. Instead the teacher becomes a reflective researcher and turns into a mentor, guide or coach. A prerequisite for learning a language through discourse is that teachers are knowledgeable about language in general and about the discourse level of the target language. The language teacher needs to be aware of how oral discourse is structured and how it differs from written discourse; various genres and text types in speech and writing as well as the macro or top-down features that make discourse coherent and micro or bottom-up elements that make discourse cohesive. What is more, understanding discourse and pragmatics, i.e. how language is used in context in order to achieve different purposes, helps the teacher select classroom activities which best facilitate the learning process in the classroom.

The instructional materials also change. They are more flexible and adaptable to specific contexts and needs. The materials are regularly carefully evaluated to check their appropriateness and degree of matching to the students' specific needs.

As Cook points out: „the foreign language classroom provides discourse analysis with one of its best sources of observation and its most rigorous testing grounds for theory" (Cook, 1989: ix). The classroom where ESP is learned through a discourse perspective should be viewed as a discourse context and the learners as a discourse community. In other words, the language classroom becomes a special type of discourse community in which the traditional language teaching methodology consisting of presentation, practice and production phase turns into *illustration*, using real data whenever possible; *interaction*, discourse-sensitive activities focusing on uses of language and negotiation of meaning; and *induction*, learners drawing conclusions and developing a skill for noticing features of form, with the aim of students developing a greater awareness of the nature of spoken and written discourse as well as the differences between them (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000: 230).

7. Conclusion

Discourse analysis is a useful analytic tool for making informed changes in instructional practices. Both ESP teachers and students should be knowledgeable about discourse analysis in order to take advantage of the discourse approach to language teaching and learning.

This paper accepts the premise that discourse approach to ESP course and syllabus design is a prerequisite for an effective ESP course in which the roles of students, teacher and teaching materials are redefined and autonomous language learning is promoted. Because of their proficiency level and the nature of the courses themselves, ESP students benefit from learning language through discourse by far more than less proficient students attending basic skill English courses.

One of the main aims of learning a language through discourse is to help students become autonomous, life-long learners and at the same time help teachers become reflective researchers who pay close attention to their classroom performance.

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POGLED NA DIZAJN KURSEVA ENGLESKOG JEZIKA ZA POSEBNE NAMENE IZ PERSPEKTIVE DISKURSA

Rezime

Tercijarno obrazovanje suočava se sa kontinuirano rastućom potrebom za kursevima engleskog jezika za posebne namene (ESP) koji više nisu ograničeni samo na nastavu i učenje vokabulara vezanog za određenu naučnu oblast. Današnji kursevi izrađeni na osnovu konkretnih zahteva, koji su usmereni na učenika treba da pripreme učenike za buduću profesionalnu komunikaciju i pruže im veštine koje se mogu dalje prenositi, a koje se smatraju neophodnim za njihovu struku. Ovo ima za cilj da poveća njihovu pokretljivost i poboljša izglede na profesionalnom planu. Ovakvo izmenjeno okruženje za učenje/nastavu zahteva redefinisanje tradicionalnih uloga nastavnika, učenika i materijala. Ovaj rad prihvata premise da pristup ESP kursevima i dizajnu programa iz perspektive diskursa predstavlja preduslov za redefinisanje uloga i promovisanje samostalnog učenja jezika.

Rad ukratko prezentuje najčešće tradicionalne definicije termina „diskurs" i „analiza diskursa". Rad takođe daje i pregled recentne literature koja se bavi dizajnom ESP kurseva kako bi dao uvid u najznačajnije karakteristike dizajna ESP kurseva i programa. Štaviše, rad ispituje i ideju sprovođenja procene efektivnih potreba pre kursa, kao i evaluaciju po završetku kursa. Još jedno značajno pitanje kojim se ovaj rad bavi jeste obuka i uključivanje ne samo ESP nastavnika, već i ESP učenika u analizu diskursa.

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