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Discourse Coherence in College English Reading and Writing

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Abstract

The development of reading and writing ability in English are the major goals in College English Curriculum Requirements (2020). The paper discusses the importance of discourse coherence in teaching reading and writing. Some parts from textbook Going Global (Elementary) are used as examples to discuss the issue. Coherence is very crucial in reading and writing process and some processing strategies are suggested to better learners' discourse understanding. The paper addresses the issue of local and global coherence and then proceed to analyze the teaching material form Going Global. It is emphasized that learners' consciousness about local and global coherence should be raised in both their reading and writing process. And some teaching implications and learning strategies are suggested based on the discussion.

Keywords: Discourse Coherence; Local Cohesion; Schemata; Processing Strategies

1 INTRODUCTION

A discourse is coherent if its elements are easily related to one another. Discourse coherence is very important for both our understanding and expression. This paper tries to discuss the issue first from local coherence of a discourse and some cohesive devices are discussed and then move on to talk about overall coherence by introducing the concepts of schemata and genres. And secondly, I analyze several parts from textbook Going Global as an example to show how discourse coherence is demonstrated and required as a basic communicative strategy for language learners. And in the last part some educational suggestions are proposed based on the analysis.

2 DISCOURSE COHERENCE

Connected discourse is coherent if its sentences can be related to one another. These relationships exist on both local and global levels. Comprehenders use a variety of strategies to understand discourse in a coherent manner. These strategies are related to assumptions about the use of given and new information. Comprehension of the global structure of discourse is guided by schemata, which are structures in semantic memory that depict the general sequence of events.

Connected discourse, be it stories, lectures or sermons, share certain properties. Research on discourse has grown significantly in recent decades. Since we rarely speak in isolated sentences, discourse seems to be a more natural unit of language to investigate. Also, sentences are also ambiguous or obscure apart from their discourse context. Just as we need to examine sentence structure to fully appreciate word processing, so we must understand discourse structure to appreciate sentence meaning. Discourse provides a rich source of material for those interested in the cognitive processes used in language.

2.1 Local Cohesion

Comprehension of connected discourse depends less on the meaning of the individual sentences than on their arrangement. It is entirely possible for a group of meaningful sentences to be thrown together in a way that makes no sense at all. There are two levels of discourse structure. Local structure, sometimes called micro-structure, is the

relationships between individual sentences in a discourse. Texts also have a global structure or macro-structure. Both levels of structure contribute to the coherence of a text, the degree to which different parts of a text are connected to one another.

At the local level, a discourse is coherent if there are semantic relationships between successive sentences. Halliday and Hasan (1976) define this as cohesion, that is, "the range of possibilities that exist for linking something with what has gone before."

One type of cohesion is called reference. In discourse, reference deals with the links between words or phrases and others or phrases. Reference is a semantic relation whereby information needed for the interpretation of one item is found elsewhere in the text. We often use pronouns such as *she, he, it, his, her and their* to refer to earlier items. Reference gives cohesion to two sentences and we may integrate them into a connected whole. We also use demonstratives such as *the, this, that, and those* for referential purposes. Another type of reference is comparative reference, in which we use terms such as *same, different, and similar* to relate current objects with those in the past. Halliday and Hasan identify several other categories of cohesion. In substitution, we replace one lexical item with another as an alternative to repeating the first. In conjunctive cohesion, we express a relationship between phrases or sentences by using conjunctions such as *and, or, but, yet,* and *so*. In lexical cohesion, a tie is made between one sentence or phrase and another by virtue of the lexical relationships between certain words in the sentence. In the simplest instance, we merely reiterate the same word used earlier. Other forms of lexical cohesion may be based on relationships such as synonymy and hyponym. Cohesion plays an important role in discourse. The cohesive ties between sentences are important clue to understand a text.

A good deal of research has been stimulated by the work of Clark and Haviland (1974). The work is based on the distinction between given and new information. Given information refers to information that author assumes the reader or listener already knows, whereas new information is information that the comprehender is assumed to not know. Most sentences contain both given and new information. Readers expect authors to use given information to refer to information the readers already know or can identify and to new information to refer to concepts with which they are not already familiar. A model of sentence integration called the given/new strategy is derived from these assumptions. According to this strategy, the process of understanding a sentence in discourse context consists of three stages: identifying the given and new information in the current sentence, finding an antecedent in memory for the given information and attaching the new information to this spot in memory. Sentences that mark information as given but have no obvious antecedent from previous sentences should pose comprehension difficulties. In comprehending a target sentence, we first divide it into given and new information. Then we search our memory for a previous reference and find it the context sentence. Finally, we attach the information to the previously stored information.

The given/new strategy provides a sensible framework within which we can examine a number of cases of integration among sentences. The process of adding new information to given information subordinates the former to the latter. The new information is generally taken as an elaboration, sometimes a small detail, of the given information. Once introduced, this new information itself serves as an antecedent for later sentences, which are subordinated to it. The natural result of this integration process is a hierarchical structure.

2.2 Schemata

In this part, we turn from local cohesion to global discourse structure, the overall organization of discourse. A schema is a structure in a semantic memory that specifies the general or expected arrangement of a body of information. Bartlett (1932) attempted to show that remembering is not a rote process but rather a process in which we retain the overall gist of an event and then reconstruct the details from this overall impression. Bartlett conducted experiments that were conductive memory errors --- unusual, bizarre stories that were repeatedly recalled over long time intervals --- so that he could examine the guiding function of schemata in the reconstruction process. He found that that when college students were given stories that were inconsistent with their schemata, recall was usually distorted in the direction of the schemata. Bartlett suggested that when we encounter an event that is discrepant from our usual understanding, we have difficulty fitting it into our existing schemata and subsequently tend either not to

remember it or to normalize it, altering its details until it is congruent with existing schemata.

The modern extensions of Bartlett's work have focused primarily on two issues: characterizing schematic knowledge more precisely and determining how this knowledge is used during discourse comprehension. Let's look at the issue of activation of appropriate schemata. The hypothesis is that we must activate the appropriate a schema to properly comprehend a story. It appears that comprehension and memory are poor when we do not have a schema that corresponds to the story that is unfolding because it is nearly impossible to see the significance of the events being described. In other instances, we may have an appropriate schema in memory but fail to activate it for one reason or another. It seems that comprehension and memory will be poor when the passage is written so obscurely that we cannot determine what might be the right schema. It is not enough to have an appropriate schema in memory; we must be able to activate it at the proper time. The second issue is the reconstruction of schema-specific details. Bartlett's notions were that the activated schema served as a retrieval plan, summoning up certain details rather than others by virtue of their centrality to the schema. Comprehenders who read a passage with one or two possible appropriate titles tended to emphasize different details in their recall. It is clear that the schema that is in effect during comprehension has a powerful organizing effect on recall. Information central to schema is well remembered.

To this point we know that the activation of a relevant schema during discourse comprehension has a major influence of how and what is recalled. The schemata considered up to this point have been based on content. And we can also address schemata regarding certain forms of discourse and that is the concept of genre. Genre is a type of discourse that has a characteristic structure. We have genres for lectures, opinion articles, speeches and comedy monologues. Genres are important because they provide us with general expectation regarding the way information in a discourse will be arranged.

3 TEACHING EXAMPLES FROM GOING GLOBAL

In teaching Going Global (Elementary), we basically follow the sequence of three steps of the taking-in part, practice and carrying out. The materials for students are from the texts of Going Global published in 2017 by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

3.1 Taking in

During the presentation process, in Case One of Going Global, a piece of material comparing two companies is presented to students to read and imitate for the writing task later on. During class, students are asked to read through the passage and mark the places of signal words, pronouns and linking words in the material and pay attention to how cohesion and coherence is achieved. After that, the teacher analyzes the text and point out explicitly where cohesive instruments are employed to make the text a coherent whole.

In the material, the two companies competing for sponsorship cooperation with GTV are compared. I asked students to notice the general layout of the piece of writing. They found that it was the general thesis statement "We are going to compare two companies: Capitogo and OutLook Group." followed by different aspects of the two companies. And this is a typical schema structure of comparison report: point-by-point. That is to be talk about one key point at a time. Then move on to the next point. With this schema in mind, namely, global coherence, the report is much easier to understand and recall. Then I guide students through the comparison by analyzing the text in detail and explicitly pointed out and marked the places where linguistic instruments are used from several aspects: history, major business, mission, sponsorship experiences and future expectations. This is a typical structure of a coherent writing with a general statement and different points to support the thesis statement. In the part where the history of the two companies is compared, the statement "Regarding history", introduces the main content of the paragraph and the third sentence "Compared with Capitogo, however, " help to make contrast between the founding history of two companies. In this way, this part is cohesive and coherent in itself and also is a part of the whole passage. In the following paragraph, the major business of the two companies is compared, with introductory expressions "As to the major business". This expression both signal the main content of the part and also its position in the whole passage. After addressing the major business of Capitogo, the business of OutLook Group is addressed and the comparison is made by using the conjunction "whereas". Thus, the different business areas of the two companies are laid out with a

clear contrast of the two. By using the necessary conjunctive devices, the business realms of the two organizations are made clear with cohesion and coherence. Then the next part is about the market recognition in the financial field. This part is different from other parts in that the two companies are similar in their very noticeable market recognition and the expression "like Capitogo" is employed to show the similarity. This is also a way of making comparison and make the whole paragraph more coherent and easier to follow. And the fifth paragraph talks about the aspect of company mission. At the beginning, it is pointed out that this part focuses on one of the several aspects of company profile by using the phrases "In terms of the company mission" and contributes to the global coherence of the whole text. In the comparison part, the cohesive device is the conjunction word "while" that shows the contrast of the different company missions. Namely, one aims to be a trusted partner in financial services and the other strives to be an eco-friendly world-class enterprise. And the following part introduces the aspect of sponsorship experience by using relatively casual expression "Talking about" and only the sponsorship experience of Capitogo has been mentioned. And by using "conversely", the situation of the other company is stated in contrast with the former one and thus the whole paragraph has been structurally presented with clarity. And the last part of the text is about future expectation of the two companies. And at the start, the expression "As for the future expectation", the comparison has been made more clearly again by the conjunctive tie "whereas" and the future blueprint of the two companies constitute a coherent paragraph in the last part.

By pointing out the specific cohesive strategies and schema of the text, I asked students to raise their consciousness about the markers and be more sensitive to the signaling expressions through the discourse. The frequent employment of phrases, conjunctions, pronounces, demonstrators and other cohesive ties contribute to the local and global cohesion and coherence of the whole text and help to optimize the general structure of the piece of writing. And it is stressed that this clear and tidy way of expressing the content is also a very efficient style in business English. And students are instructed to familiarize themselves with the concrete writing style of the material, follow the example and prepare themselves for a piece of writing output based on the presentation.

3.2 Practice

After the presentation of the reading part, the following exercises focus on the conjunctive ties as a coherence device. In the first practice, students are asked to identify and pinpoint the exact expressions indicating comparison and contrast. And the expressions are conjunctions like “Compared with; however; conversely; like Capitogo, also” and so on. By stressing this coherence instruments, the awareness of local coherence can be raised and students are encouraged to imitate using the ties when they do their own writings. And the second of exercise is to complete some sentences about two companies mentioned earlier in the textbook with transitional words to make them coherent in both meaning and structure. Students have to understand the direction and logic of the material before then can decide which conjunction to use. By asking learners to employ transitional words and expressions to make comparison and contrast, we actually help enhance the understanding and consciousness of local and global coherence and prepare learners to conduct their writing accordingly.

3.3 Writing Assignment

In the Carrying out part, students are asked to write a report comparing the three companies GTV collects information about. This is a writing assignment and students can refer to the article in Taking-in part to write their own report. This assignment has been put on the Pigai Online Platform and a reference article can be seen upon submission. I also take time out in class to emphasize the local and global coherence issue in the writing process. In the sample writing, three companies are compared from several aspects following the schema of point-by-point comparison and discourse coherence is achieved on both local and global levels. By using necessary cohesive ties like conjunctions, signals words, pronouns, repetition and so on, the sample, like the passage in Taking-in part, set a good example of a coherent writing for students.

4 TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

Based on the analysis of local and global coherence, several process strategies are put forward for students to refer to. One general strategy that has a good deal of merit is to actively read textual material. Active processing refers to a

collection of activities that includes relating new information to information we have permanent memory, asking questions of the material, and writing summaries or outlines of the material. For example, taking notes is an effective strategy because it forces learners to make decisions about whether the information was important, whether they agree with it and so on and these decisions promotes understanding and retention.

Another strategy is to identify the main points. Careful attention to the local structure of discourse helps, but it can be difficult to figure out what an instructor or author regards as the main points. Several studies indicate that the difficulty in determining main points may be traced to the presence of distracting and often confusing details. When the key points of a passage are signaled explicitly, performance improves. Reder and Anderson (1980) found that retention was better when the material was presented in a condensed version. Similarly, Giora (1993) found that analogies in text did not facilitate comprehension and may impair recall.

Try to build global structures. Learners become more familiar with the content and structure of a text; they can gradually induce its schema. One good test of whether learners have successfully done this is to write a summary for the text. The requires them to select specific propositions as the most important ones and to generalize some of the individual propositions into broader thematic statements. As students become more proficient, they can shift to a greater reliance on global processing strategies.

5 Conclusion

Reading and writing are two of the most significant language skills that college English learners are supposed to master and are especially necessary when we need to communicate China's culture, ideas and values to the world. Discourse coherence is a crucial factor for the reading and writing process. The theories and researches in this regard have been widely applied to English teaching and learning practice. And teachers should enhance students' consciousness of the issue to help facilitate their language processing efficiency and English proficiency.

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