

Discourse Strategies in the Teaching of English Reading

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Abstract

This paper explores the text types, patterns and topic continuity which may be found in texts are the objects of interpretation by the reader, and they are often signaled by the grammatical and lexical devices. So they are very useful for the teaching of reading.

Key words: Discourse strategies; Text type; Text patterns; Topic continuity

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INTRODUCTION

Discourses with different types have not only different linguistic styles, but also different structural patterns. Discourse types determine the formation of formal structures of texts and this determination leads to the formation of discourse patterns. This paper explores the text types, patterns and topic continuity which may be found in texts are the objects of interpretation by the reader, and they are often signaled by the grammatical and lexical devices. So they are very useful for the teaching of reading.

1. DISCOURSE STRATEGIES

Discourse strategies refer to the general textual strategies and choices made according to the interactive purposes

in the production of discourses. In the production of discourses, we are often face with many choices as to what discourse types to choose, or what discourse-strategic continuity to use. Usually we have good reasons to explain why we have chosen certain forms instead of the others. So strategies are made to judge which choice can best serve the purpose of the production of the discourse. Generally speaking, discourse strategies can be mainly divided into the following three parts: discourse types, discourse patterns and discourse-strategic continuities.

1.1 Discourse Types

Discourse types are identified as “a conceptual framework which enables us to classify texts in terms of communicative intentions serving an overall rhetorical purpose” (Hatim & Mason, 1990, p.140), and they may be defined on the basis of cognitive categories or on the basis of strictly linguistic criteria. The commonly accepted typology is Werlich’s (1976) typology, which includes five types: description, narration, exposition, argumentation, and instruction. The typology is based on cognitive properties of text types: 1) differentiation and interrelation of perception in space (description); 2) differentiation and interrelation of perception in time (narration); 3) comprehension of general concepts through differentiation by analysis and/or synthesis (exposition); 4) Judging, evaluation of relations between and among concepts through the extraction of similarities, contrasts, and transformations (argumentation) and 5) planning of future behavior (instruction).

Discourse types thus refer to the specific linguistic structural system whose choice is part of the discourse strategic choice, and it is product-oriented. It is closely connected with the theory of register.

1.2 Discourse Pattern

Discourse pattern is another way to classify discourses with inter-textual standards beginning from the form and content structures of the discourses. Discourses with

different types have not only different linguistic styles, but also different structural patterns. Discourse types determine the formation of formal structures of texts and this determination leads to the formation of discourse patterns. Generally speaking, there are five discourse patterns: problem-solution pattern, claim-counterclaim pattern, narrative pattern, question-answer pattern and general-specific pattern.

Problem-solution pattern is a “situation-problem-response-evaluation/result” sequence. This pattern can occur in different discourse types and different topic fields and contexts, such as argumentation and exposition. Claim-counterclaim pattern is typical of argumentative texts. In this pattern, a generally accepted idea or other people’s idea is first proposed and clarified by the writer, then he will clarify this idea, and propose his own point of view, or to illustrate the real conditions or counterclaims. Narrative pattern appears in almost all texts. Stories, anecdotes or jokes all belong to the category. Question-answer pattern usually has a clear question at the beginning of the text, and the text is developed to seek for a satisfactory answer to this question. In McCarthy’s opinion, general-specific pattern typically appears in estate agent’s sales literature in Britain, where a general description of the property for sale is followed by detailed descriptions of individual room/features, and then, finally a return to a general statement about the whole property again.

1.3 Text-Strategic Continuity

It is the concrete example of the text strategies. They are the general strategies and choices made in the production of texts according to certain communicative purposes, and they are abstract.

In producing certain texts, the producer will find that one pattern will be more natural than the other ones in serving for his purpose. For example, when the producer writes a text guiding people around an old castle, he would follow the sequence of places in order to develop the text with the scenic spots best for tourists; if he writes to describe the castle he visited to his friends, he might write it in the sequence of places, but other sequences might be more appropriate (for example, the sequence of time or the sequence of classification). This development of text can be centered on the things he’s interested in the castle; if he write for a historical description of the castle, the time sequence would be the most appropriate. In other words, text-strategic continuity refers to the orientation or the tendency for the thematic continuity or topical continuity to make the development patterns most acceptable to the text receivers according to the writer’s communicative purposes. In certain communicative situations, the degree of acceptability will be judged by the text producer and the continuity is shown at the surface layer by linguistic features.

There is usually more than one type of continuity in

a text, with one playing the dominant role. Generally speaking, there are five types of continuity: continuity of time, continuity of places, continuity of participants, continuity of topics and continuity of actions.

Continuity of time is realized by the time chain located at the beginning of the sentences or paragraphs. Sometimes non-adverbial temporal forms are used in such chains. The following text is an excerpt from a journal of travelling. The temporal expression at the beginning of each paragraph forms continuity of time to produce cohesion and coherence of the text, and the shift of time divides the text into different smaller units.

Example 1: Saturday, 21 February

We put on wet clothes and set off at 7:15 with Ghiberti Monaco on the long trek into Tortoise Country...We had been walking for about 3 hours *when we came to our first Galapagos, a tortoise about two feet long...An hour or so later* we passed another 2-2.5 foot tortoise---most beautifully marked, with a shiny black shell. *At about noon*, when we had been walking for nearly five hours, I leading my horse, we came upon a much larger tortoise in a pool of water. *Meanwhile* there was some discussion about the plan, about food, and about who should film which tortoise first.... Monaco took us to one rather large tortoise....*Afterwards* the sun came out and Chis and I left our lunch and went to this tortoise which....*Presently* Monaco returned...*By now* a dark cloud had come up, and we decided to leave the tortoise for the night....We started back to camp just as the rain began and were soaked through *by the time we got there....Then* we set up the jungle hammock...

Continuity of place is realized by the adverbial chains of places at the beginning of the sentences or paragraphs. Continuity of participants is typically realized by the continuity of grammatical subjects or topics of the text:

Example 2: Marc Chagall (1887-) was born in Vitebsk, Russia. *He* found post-revolutionary Russia, with its official anti-religious policy, increasingly difficult to work in, and, in 1929, *he* immigrated to France. Here *he* continued to paint in a personal style based on a complex mixture of Russian icon and Russian peasant art, using themes from Russian fairy tales and Jewish folklore. At the same time *he* combines Fauvist color with Cubist form. When new participants are introduced into texts, the natural choice is the form of nouns or noun phrases. After they are introduced, the form of participant is replaced by referents. But when there is too much space between the two referents referring to the same participant, ambiguity might occur, and nouns or noun phrases are preferred. Besides, when referents referring to other participants appear between two referents which refer to the same specific participant, ambiguity may also occur, so nouns or noun phrases are preferable when the participants shifts from one to another. Continuity of participants is a basic feature of narrative texts, so it is often closely connected with continuity of places and continuity of actions.

Continuity of participants refers to the continuity of referents of characters, animals, or events which are considered as topics, while continuity of topics refers to the continuity of referents of non-humans and non-animals which are treated as topics. For example,

Example 3: West red cedar is not a true cedar but a kind of cypress found from Alaska to California. *It* grows rapidly in mild wet western areas to 30m, but is slow in dry places. *It* is often grown as a hedge, clipping well, and is useful forest tree to grow in shade of old larch woods, giving a light, strong timber.

This continuity can appear in many types of texts. But different from continuity of participants, this continuity usually appears in non-narrative texts like expository and argumentative texts. Sometimes it also appear in instructive texts. Continuity of action is closely connected with time. First, the sequence of texts usually follows the actual sequence of actions, and this is called temporal sequentiality; second, there is usually a short gap between continuous actions, and this is called temporal adjacency. In the following example, the actions and events follow the actual sequence of the narrated events, and there is little or no gap between the continuous actions:

Example 4: Ann *was seized* with a panic; a sob *broke* from her throat. She *ran* for the door. But she was too late. A black figure *dropped* from the bookcase to the ground and, as Ann *reached* her hands to the door, a scarf *was whipped* about her mouth, striping her cry. She *was jerked* back *fell*, the room *was lighted* up. Her assailant *fell* upon her, driving the breath out of her lungs, and *knotted* the scarf tightly at the back of her head.

Past tense is used in the text, and the text is developed following the orders of actual events and actions, continuity of action plays a dominant role. The continuity of participants and that of topics change continuously to foreground different participants in order to shift readers' attention.

2. DISCOURSE STRATEGIES IN THE TEACHING OF READING

As illustrated above, discourse can be divided into five types: description, narration, exposition, argumentation, and instruction, and there are five discourse patterns: problem-solution pattern, claim-counterclaim pattern, narrative pattern, question-answer pattern and general-specific pattern. This is a way to classify discourses with inter-textual standards beginning from the form and content structures of the discourses. Discourses with different types have not only different linguistic styles, but also different structural patterns. Discourse types determine the formation of formal structures of texts and this determination leads to the formation of discourse patterns. The text types, text patterns and text topic continuity which may be found in texts are the objects of

interpretation by the reader, and they are often signaled by the grammatical and lexical devices. So they are very useful for the teaching of reading. The following example shows how well the theories of text types, text patterns and text strategic continuity can be used in reading comprehension.

Example 5: Most people like to take a camera with them when they travel abroad (1). But all airports nowadays have x-ray security screening and x-rays damaging film (2). One solution to this problem is to purchase a specially designed lead-lined pouch (3). These are cheap and can protect film from all but strong x-rays (4). The first sentence provides a situation for the readers, and the second sentence provides some sort of complication or problem. The third sentence describes a response to the problem and the final sentence gives a positive evaluation of the response. We have a conjunction (but) to indicate an adversative relation, backward lexical reference to "this problem" (damage caused by x rays) and a forward reference to the solution (lead-lined pouch). Both readers and writers need to be aware of these signaling devices and to be able to use them when necessary to process textual relations that are not immediately obvious and to compose texts that assist readers in the act of interpretation. The textual patterns are culturally ingrained, but they are often realized in a sequence of textual segments.

With the knowledge of text types, students can predict what the text is about - description, narration, exposition, argumentation, and instruction, and this will help them decide to use top-down or bottom-up reading processes; after the text type is determined, they can read to find what text patterns are used.

Finding patterns in texts is a matter of interpretation by the reader, making use of clues and signals provided by the author; it is not a question of finding one single right answer, and it will often be possible to analyze a given text in more than one way. But certain patterns do tend to occur frequently in particular settings: the problem-solution pattern is frequent in advertising texts (one way to sell a product is to convince people they have a problem they may not be aware of) and in texts reporting technological advances. Claim---counterclaim texts are frequent in political journalism, as well as in the letter-to-the-editor pages of the newspapers and magazines. With a clear idea of the text patterns used, students can think about the sequence of the elements in the text pattern, and this will reduce their reading time reading for details.

With the knowledge of text strategic continuity, student will have a thorough knowledge of the arrangement of the text---whether it is centered on time, space, topic or character. Thus they can predict what questions to be asked for the reading task.

The following example shows how well the theories of text types, text patterns and text strategic continuity can be used in reading comprehension: Read the incomplete

news story below and guess what happened in the missing parts by answer the questions that follow.

Example 6: FATAL MISTAKE

IN MANCHESTER last night, a man seriously in - ____ mistaking ____ . There had been several burglaries in the neighborhood lately and when Mr. Brain Eliot heard a noise, he did not hesitate for a second but ____ shotgun and went downstairs. When he saw something moving in the living-room, ____ Eliot's son was rushed to Manchester General Hospital ____ in a critical condition.

1. What did Mr. Brain Eliot take his son for?
2. What did he do when he heard the noise?
3. How did he injure his son?
4. Was his son dead?

From the requirement we know that this text is a news story, so we can determine that the text type is narration, and the text pattern is a narrative pattern, the title is the abstraction – a brief summary made on the content at the beginning of the narration – that the story is about a fatal mistake. “In Manchester last night, a man seriously in ...” is the orientation which refers to the statement about the time, place and characters made by the narrator. As the actions of character are in blanks for the students to fill in, that might be the result of the event. With the next sentence showing the development of the event (the complicating event in Labov's term), we can guess that Mr. Eliot took his son for a burglar. The development and planning of the events of the story is also shown in this sentence. The next sentence shows Mr. Eliot's reaction to the condition, “to take up his shotgun and went downstairs”. The last sentence is the evaluation part, which the character's evaluation is made on what he had done. After reading the text, we can also see that the continuity of character is used, and the story is centered on Mr. Eliot. With the above analysis, we can answer the questions easily: 1. Mr. Eliot took his son for a burglar. 2. He did not hesitate for a second but take up his gun and went downstairs when he heard the noise. 3. He fired the gun at the person moving. 4. No, he wasn't. But he's in a critical condition.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, questions of reading pedagogy have centered on whether bottom-up or top-down strategies are more important. The debate seems to have settled on a compromise between local and global decoding, and there is general agreement that efficient readers use top-down and bottom-up processing simultaneously. This fits with our general view of discourse as being manifested in macro-level patterns to which a constellation of local lexicon-grammatical choices contributes. The best reading materials will encourage an engagement with larger lexical textual forms (for example through problem-solving exercises at the text level) but not neglect the role of individual words, phrases and grammatical devices in guiding the reader around the text. Thus the discourse analysis theories illustrated above can help teachers make use of the current reading materials and help students form their own reading techniques so that their reading ability can be improved.

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