

Understanding the Discourse Competence of the College Students: Towards the Development of the Social-Communicative Competence in the Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

The ways that children implement social and communication skills in peer-group interaction provide the foundation for successful later life adjustment. In this study, the focus was to find out the discourse competence of college students as basis for the development of the social-communicative competence in the early childhood education. This made use of the Descriptive research design which utilized a picture-cue writing ability test. The data indicate that the respondents' discourse competence (writing) test is described as average. Further analysis of the results suggests that the respondents have major problems in sentence construction rules; error on grammar or word order is fairly frequent. This implies that the respondents have difficulty deducing the connection between ideas. They seem to experience frequent use of wrong or inappropriate words. Expression of ideas is limited because of inadequate vocabulary. They lack the repertoire of words and they have limited knowledge of the English structure.

Keywords: discourse competence, social-communicative competence, childhood education, content, organization, language used, vocabulary, mechanics

Introduction

Discourse competence, which was introduced by Canale (1983), pertains to the ability to skillfully combine linguistic elements and language structures to create a coherent and cohesive piece of work. Discourse competence (DC) encompasses the knowledge and skills required to effectively handle linguistic features and semantic functions within a text or context, going beyond individual words and sentences (Canale and Swain, 1980; Paltridge, 2012). Various techniques, such as repetition, progression, consistency, and relevance of ideas, contribute to achieving coherence and organizing meaning by establishing logical relationships between groups of utterances. In written discourse, discourse competence involves linking ideas across sentences, while in spoken discourse, it involves linking ideas across utterances. Additionally, the unity of a text depends on contextual factors, such as the participants' status, the purpose of the interaction, and interactional norms or conventions (Schachter, 1990). Consequently, discourse competence can intersect with sociolinguistic competence, as discourse is a social practice in which individuals employ unique sociolinguistic discursive patterns guided by contextual factors and interactional conventions. Therefore, individuals must engage in communication within society to develop their discourse competence.

Social and communicative competence, as commonly defined, encompasses the capacity to effectively employ communication skills to attain personal and relational objectives through interpersonal problem-solving strategies. Rubin and colleagues, for example, define social competence as the ability to achieve personal goals in social interactions while concurrently maintaining positive relationships with others consistently and across diverse situations (Rubin & Rose-Krasnor, 1992, p. 285). This comprehensive definition encompasses skills and abilities that pertain to all facets of interpersonal problem-solving, ranging from managing one's emotions during social interactions to negotiating resolutions in conflicts between individuals (Mills & Rubin, 1993, p. 98). Notably, negotiation necessitates functional communication competence, which entails the strategic utilization of communicative resources to accomplish personal and social goals, such as persuasion, information dissemination, consolation, appeasement, compromise, and similar objectives (Burlison, Delia, & Applegate, 1995, p. 36).

According to research, the use of effective classroom communication can enhance the relationship between teachers and students, create a welcoming and supportive learning atmosphere, and offer students additional opportunities to explore information, leading to a more profound comprehension of new ideas. Developing proficiency in this skill is crucial for college students. Through discourse analysis, researchers can gain insight into the intentions behind a text by taking a broader viewpoint. This analytical approach is valuable for understanding the implicit meaning of spoken or written texts, as it takes into account the social and historical contexts.

Discourse analysis assists students in critically evaluating their acquired knowledge, enhancing social interaction, and building self-confidence. Thus, the researcher was motivated to pursue this study as a basis for the development of social-communicative competence in the early childhood education.

Related Literature and Studies

On Discourse Competence (Writing)

Thaiss (2001) highlighted the significance of written language in English studies, not only as a tool for transmitting knowledge but as knowledge itself. Vocabulary remains a crucial component in language teaching and learning, particularly in discourse-driven approaches. Gairns and Redman (1986) introduced the discourse dimension into vocabulary instruction, combining traditional and more communicative methodologies.

The origins of discourse analysis can be attributed to Harris (1952), who focused on the distribution of linguistic elements in extended texts and their relationship to the social context. Hymes (1960) introduced a sociological approach by studying speech within its social settings. Additionally, linguistic philosophers such as Austin (1962), Searle (1969), and Grice (1975) advanced the understanding of language as a form of social action through their contributions to speech-act theory and conversational maxims. This led to the emergence of pragmatics, the study of meaning in context, as explored by scholars such as Levinson (1983) and Leech (1983). Halliday (1973) adopted a functional approach to language heavily influenced by discourse analysis, emphasizing the social functions of language and the thematic and informational structure of speech and writing.

The field of Discourse analysis has been shaped by the contributions of text grammarians who primarily concentrated on written language. These text grammarians view texts as interconnected language units that display discernible relationships. Renowned linguists such as Van Dijk (1972), De Beaugrande (1980), Halliday and Hasan (1976), as well as the linguists from the Prague School, have played a crucial role in advancing this field. The Prague School, in particular, emphasized the arrangement of information in discourse and established connections between grammar and discourse.

To foster students' understanding, it is beneficial to engage them in various activities related to sentence combining, expansion, and manipulation (Strong, 1986; Killgallon, 1987; Daiker, Kerek, & Morenberg, 1990). Encouraging students to write extensively for different purposes and real audiences is crucial. Teachers should provide support in sentence structure and writing mechanics during the revision and editing stages (Rosen, 1987).

Bartholomae (1985), drawing from the field of English composition, proposed that writing should be viewed as a performance that surpasses the mere act of putting words on a page. It involves adopting the ways of thinking specific to the discourse of a particular community. Bartholomae asserted that students must learn to express themselves in a manner aligned with the language and modes of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing within that community (p. 134).

On Discourse Competence (Writing)

Teaching grammar in the context of writing is essential as writing is a complex and demanding task for students. Earlier studies conducted from the 1960s onwards have shown that teaching grammar in isolation from writing instruction does not improve students' writing skills (Braddock et al., 1963;

Hillocks, 1986). It has been observed that simply teaching formal grammar does not effectively transfer to broader aspects of composition. After thoroughly examining students' writing, Slaughnessy (1977) deduces that the most successful grammar instruction is the one that offers the greatest advantage while requiring the least amount of time investment.

Weaver (1988) proposes a comparable method of incorporating grammar instruction within the framework of writing. She emphasizes the need for students to understand and apply the grammatical aspects most relevant to writing. The strategy of sentence combining, which involves merging shorter sentences to form longer and more intricate sentences, is an effective approach to teaching students how to diversify sentence structure to modify meaning and style (Mellon, 1969; O'Hare, 1973; Cooper, 1975; Slaughnessy, 1977; Hillocks, 1986; Strong, 1986). According to Hillocks (1986), practicing sentence combining provides writers with a systematic understanding of syntactic options. This knowledge allows them to consider different options in their minds and on paper, enabling them to select the most appropriate choices. Moreover, Hillocks and Smith (1991) provide evidence that systematic exercises in sentence combining elevate students' comprehension of syntactic structures and enhance the quality of their sentences, particularly when considering stylistic impacts.

According to Noguchi (1991), grammar choices have a significant impact on writing style. In this regard, sentence combining serves as an effective approach to help students develop fluency and variety in their writing styles. Bateman and Zidonis (1964) conducted a research study employing the generative approach of Noam Chomsky (1956), Robert Lees (1960, 1957), and Charles Fillmore (1964, 1963, 1962) to instruct students on the process of constructing sentences in the context of writing compositions.

Additionally, writing is perceived as a cultural activity, and a notable viewpoint on writing as a cultural practice was introduced by Robert Kaplan (1966). Kaplan examined paragraph organization in essays written by English as a Second Language students and identified five major paragraph organizational structures based on the cultural backgrounds of the students.

In other words, Kaplan discovered that students' ways of developing and organizing ideas in their first language were also reflected in their essays written in English, their second language. Flores (2000:164) explored the cultural dimensions of writing styles among Filipinos and sought to establish connections between cultural aspects of writing and second language teaching issues. He initiated his exploratory paper by reflecting on cross-cultural encounters in his experiences with both American and Filipino students.

“When American students speak in class, I notice that they usually stay on their main topic, more so than Filipino students do. I must admit that I expected this. Filipinos view Americans as direct both in speech and writing. Why can't Filipino students be direct? Why do they ramble on and on? These questions apply to those who are supposed to be bilingual and comfortable with English”.

Kaplan put forward the notion that English texts displayed a sequential and hierarchical arrangement, whereas Semitic texts (such as Hebrew and Arabic) were distinguished by their parallel structure. Oriental texts were noted for their "indirection," and Russian and Roman texts tended to include digressions. There is some evidence supporting these differences in textual structure, such as the acceptance of seemingly abrupt and irrelevant insertions in Japanese texts, which may appear unconventional to English readers (Hinds, 1983). Additionally, certain features of word order and the use of conjunctions in Indian English writing show influences from Indian languages (Kachru, 1987).

Research Questions

1. What is the overall discourse competence of college students ?
2. What is the level of discourse competence in writing in the following dimensions?
 - a. Content
 - b. Organization
 - c. language used

- d. vocabulary, and
- e. Mechanics

Methodology

The study made use of the Descriptive research design. Which is aimed to investigate the level of Discourse competence of the summer 2011 college students. It sought to determine the Discourse competence in writing: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics concerning gender, first language, and course. The selection of the respondents was done using a purposive sampling procedure. Only those students identified according to their courses were considered to participate in the study. The data were obtained from the office of the Dean of the College of Communications and Humanities. Out of 106 respondents, only 99 were considered because six respondents did not provide the complete data for tabulation. To meet the research objectives, a Discourse Competence by Amilasan (2002) which is A Picture-Cue Writing Ability Test- a standardized writing test was utilized.

The respondents were asked to describe the picture and were scored based on the rating scale criteria adapted from Yap Aizon (2000), Amilasan (2002), and Galvez (2006) using the following components: content, organization, vocabulary, the language used and mechanics. For the scores of the respondents in the discourse competence Test (Writing), three (3) correctors rated the paper of the examinees using a scorecard from 1-4, and 4 as the highest rating. The mean average of the three (3) raters formed part of the individual score of the respondents. Each paper was scored based on the rating scale criteria adapted from Yap-Aizon (2000), Amilasan (2002), and Galvez (2006).

Results and Discussion

Onthe Overall Discourse Competence of the Respondents

Table 1. shows the overall discourse competence of the respondents. The data indicate that the respondents obtained the mean average score of 12.5698 in the discourse competence (writing) test which is described as AVERAGE. It means that the respondents have limited knowledge of the subject. Content is of little substance. This implies that the respondents have difficulty deducing the connection between ideas. They seem to experience frequent use of wrong or inappropriate words. Expression of ideas is limited because of inadequate vocabulary. They lack the repertoire of words and they have limited knowledge of the English structure.

Further analysis of the results suggests that the respondents have major problems with sentence construction rules; error in grammar or word order is fairly frequent. They frequently experience errors in spelling, punctuation, or capitalization which would sometimes lead to obscurity.

Table 3. Overall Discourse Competence of the Respondents

	Mean	Std Deviation	Description
Overall writing	12.5698	2.81583	Average

On the level of discourse competence of the respondents in the DifferentDimensions

Table 2. presents the respondents’ discourse competence by dimensions. The data show that the respondents obtained the mean average scores of 2.6098 for content, 2.5122 for organization, 2.5220

for vocabulary, 2.5523 for language use, and 2.3734 for mechanics with corresponding standard deviations of .64284, .65722, .59496, .54331, and .56658 all of which are described as AVERAGE. It means that the respondents have limited knowledge of the subject. As earlier explained, the respondents written work regarding content is of little substance. The respondents have difficulty deducing the connection between ideas. They appear to frequently employ incorrect or unsuitable vocabulary. Their ability to express ideas is constrained due to a lack of sufficient vocabulary.

Further analysis of the results suggests that the respondents have major problems with sentence construction rules; errors of grammar or word order are fairly frequent. They frequently experience errors in spelling, punctuation, or capitalization which would sometimes lead to obscurity.

Table 2. Respondents' Discourse Competence by Components

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Description
Content	2.6098	.64284	Average
Organization	2.5122	.65722	Average
Vocabulary	2.5220	.59496	Average
Language Use	2.5523	.54331	Average
Mechanics	2.3734	.56658	Average

Conclusions

Anchoring on the findings on the findings, this study concludes that the respondents have limited knowledge of the subject. Content is of little substance. This implies that the respondents have difficulty deducing the connection between ideas. It appears that they frequently encounter the incorrect or unsuitable usage of words. Their ability to articulate ideas is restricted due to insufficient vocabulary. They lack the repertoire of words and they have limited knowledge of the English structure. The discourse competence of the respondents by dimensions is described as average. It means that the respondents have limited knowledge of the subject. As earlier explained, the respondents written work with reference to content is of little substance. The respondents have difficulty deducing the connection between ideas.

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