Discourse Competence and Its Cultivating Strategies in English Major Instruction of China's Universities

Yi LUO

(School of Teacher Education, Zhejiang Ocean University, China)

ABSTRACT: *As an indispensable part of language competence, discourse competence is difficult to develop because of its lack of the teaching target orientation in the English instruction of English major in China's universities, which has led to a lack of clarity of teaching and assessment goals. For this case, this paper examines the definitions of discourse competence, illustrates the connotations of discourse competence, and proposes that discourse competence should be established in English Syllabus for English Major of Colleges and Universities in China. Then the paper proposes the effective strategies for cultivating discourse competence from the following aspects: increasing teachers' awareness of discourse competence and discourse teaching, strengthening teacher training to increase their own discourse competence, compiling textbooks with features of discourse competence training, and implementing discourse-based approach to English teaching.*

Keywords: *discourse competence, discourse-based approach, English instruction in Universities, cultivating strategies*

I. INTRODUCTION

Discourse competence (DC) is a term which is often mentioned and employed by academic circle. Discourse-level teaching is often discussed and the significance of DC is emphasized in English teaching in colleges and universities. In recent years, more and more scholars have participated in research into DC. They have examined the role of DC to oral English teaching (Wang Jingping, 2009)[1], explored the significance of DC to English reading instruction (Guo Yuewen, 2004) [2] and English writing instruction (Yang Yuchen, 2006)[3], illustrated how to train DC (Gao Yanmei, 2005)[4], analyzed the relationship between DC and PPT design (Zhang Yan & Luo Linquan, 2007)[5] and introduced the training of DC in designing college English textbooks(Zhu Ping,2002)[6], etc. However, lack of the teaching target orientation of DC in *English Syllabus for English Major of Colleges and* Universities (2000 edition) (hereinafter referred to as Syllabus) in China has led to the fact that the concept and connotation of DC is seldom discussed, especially lacking of studies on the cultivation mechanism of English DC in Chinese Context, which will undoubtedly cause people to have a vague understanding of DC, which will lead to the teaching purpose is unknown, lack of training methods and poor teaching effect. Just as Cheng Xiaotang (2005) said, although some teachers have begun to try the so-called discourse teaching, it is only amelioration on the basis of the traditional model, rather than reform.[7] In view of this, we think that the cultivation of DC should first solve the problem of the teaching objectives, and on this basis explore its effective training strategy.

II. THE CONCEPT AND CONNOTATION OF DISCOURSE COMPETENCE

1. Concepts of discourse competence

Some Based on their own research, scholars have different definitions of DC from different aspects.Kaplan & Knutson（1993）suggested that DC can be "defined as the ability to understand and produce connected, coherent speech", including   (1) produce continuous discourse, (making appropriate use of sentence fragments as well as complex syntax); (2) make a point, develop and support ideas, and make transitions between ideas in exiended production activities; (3) exhibit appropriate turn-taking behavior; (4) vary syntax and effectively and word order; use rhetorical devices (such as speed changes and intonation); (5) take and hold the floor; open and close discussion; (6) convey attitudinal as well as referential information; (7) and ultimately, realize their communicative intent and bring about desired outcomes. [8]

Hatim (2001) regards that DC refers to the following three kinds of abilities: First, the ability of using lexical rules and grammar rules of a language to create a perfect sentence; second, the ability of knowing when, where and with whom to speak these sentences; third, the ability of knowing how to make sentences play the role in the final perfect draft.[9] Bhatia（2008：144）introduces the general term "discursive competence", which includes textual competence, generic competence and social competence, to extend the concept of discourse competence. Textual competence represents not only the ability to master the linguistic code, but also the ability to use textual, contextual and pragmatic knowledge to construct and interpret contextually appropriate texts. Generic competence is the ability to respond to recurrent and novel rhetorical situations by constructing,

interpreting, using and often exploiting generic conventions embedded in specific disciplinary cultures and practices to achieve professional ends. Social competence incorporates an ability to use language more widely to participate effectively in a variety of social and institutional contexts to give expression to one's social identity, in the context of constraining social structures and social processes.[10]

According to Kaplan and Knutson, DC involves the textual cohesion and coherence ability in the process of discourse production and interpretation, and the ability of making the style of discourse appropriate. Hakim emphasizes sentence generating ability, pragmatic competence and textual competence. And Bhatia variously illustrates discourse competence from the aspects: context, pragmatics, discourse, genre, and the appropriation of social culture and professional purpose, giving more extensive meaning to DC.

Chinese scholars generally regard the ability to understand and produce coherent discourse as the main content of DC, For example, Sun Yu (1998) argues that text refers to the ability to use various forms of coherence (cohesive devices) to logically link together sentences expressing a certain topic and the ability to understand and expressing propositional meaning, at the same time the ability to understand and complete the relevant illocutionary act.[11] Wen Qiufang (1999:22) regards that DC is the ability to make discourse cohesive and coherent, and to be able to use the knowledge, specifically, it refers to the language learners to organize the language materials related to the subject, and form the form of cohesion and semantic coherence.[12] Zhang Xiyong and Li Zhiwei (2007) illustrate DC in detail. They believe that DC can be understood as the ability to connect sentences into an article as a meaningful whole. Concretely, in listening and speaking, it refers to the understanding of each other's intentions and meanings, and the ability to speak cohesive and coherent utterances, to form a smooth communication. In reading comprehension, it regards the discourse as a whole, and forms a sense of schemata by understanding the author's invention and the pragmatic meanings of words, sentences and the whole discourse. In writing, discourse is regarded as the fact that when organizing an article, appropriate textual models, grammar and rhetorical means are employed to connect sentence groups and make the article cohesive and coherent.[13]

The concepts above illustrate the contents of DC from different aspects, and refer to the nature of DC. For this case, we can generalize DC as the ability to interpret and construct coherent texts using textual knowledge and the ability to use language appropriately in the social and cultural context and in the professional context.

2. Mastering the language features of spoken and written styles

Another important factor in DC is the ability to distinguish and master the language features of spoken and written styles. We should not only understand that spoken English is often arbitrary, and the written language is formal, but also understand that according to different communicators, "informal" and "formal" words may be used in oral English, such as the "chat" between friends and the public "speech", the former is more casual, and the latter is more formal. In the written language, "casualness" and "formality" do exist, Take "personal letters" and "business letters" for example, the former is more casual, the latter is more formal. In addition, in daily conversation learners should pay attention to the simple forms of words, fillers, common words, short sentences, simple sentences, and run-on sentences, especially they should learn to employ the following skills: the change of intonation, talk turn, starting the conversation, maintaining the conversation and ending the conversation, to achieve the communicative purpose.

3. Achieving proper diction and appropriate structure based on register

Choice of words is not only based on its language type (spoken or written), but on its register, that is, in a particular context, certain words and structures are often used. For example, in the airport we often use the following words: ticket, check-in, security check and boarding pass, etc. In addition, in academic articles, we often use the following words and expressions, such as examine, illustrate, explore, discuss, analyze, show, result, argue, suggest, to sum up and for instance, and compound sentence, passive structure and stressed sentence. These words and syntactic structures have close relationship of register in which they appear, which are the necessary language elements to effectively achieve the function of a specific topic.

4. Distinguishing the relationships between thesis statement, topic sentences, facts and supporting sentences

The thesis statement of the discourse and the topic sentences of the paragraphs constitute typical structural features of English discourses. As the center narrated by the discourse, the thesis statement is illustrated carefully by the topic sentences, which directly serve the thesis statement and are supported by concrete facts or examples (supporting sentences). Therefore, clarifying and distinguishing the relationships between them helps construct discourses consistent with the English thought pattern.

5. Achieving stylistic appropriateness based on social culture

In spoken and written communications, communicators can choose the proper way to express according to the social status, the close or distant relationship between them, and cultural customs, so as to choose proper words and appropriate style, namely, according to the social and cultural context, learners are able to choose proper the tone, such as "tactful and direct", "formal and casual", "probable and affirm", etc.

6. Interpreting and producing academic discourses according to professional purposes

According to the fields of subjects (such as foreign affairs, foreign trade, culture, law, education, science and technology, etc.), students should obtain knowledge and skills of English discourse related to their majors, and have the ability to do the relevant academic research, to achieve their professional purposes. Concretely, they can read articles and books related to their majors, conduct academic exchange in English in an international conference, and write academic articles and reports in English.

7. Choosing the proper semantic structure according to the communicative purpose

English discourse with different communicative purpose has its own specific semantic structure, whose order and necessary elements are the signs that distinguish this genre from others. Therefore, mastering semantic structures of different discourses helps construct discourses consistent with English schemata to effectively achieve communicative purposes. For example, the semantic structure of English note of asking for a leave is different from Chinese one, that is, the former requires the purpose putting in the front and the reason in the back, on the contrary, the latter requires the reason in the front and the purpose in the back. When writing this kind of discourse, if we use the Chinese semantic structure to replace the English one, the writing purpose is too vague to achieve, vice versa. Thus, it is especially vital to choose the relevant semantic structure when learners construct a discourse.

8. Using the relevant discourse development patterns according to the genres

Discourse development pattern is the organizational form and logical structure. English discourses with different genres have their established development patterns of discourse. For example, exemplification expository essays concretely explain the thesis statement by means of exemplification, process expository essays explain relevant steps by means of process analysis, and cause and effect expository essays clarify the reasons by analyzing cause and/or effect of the event. Therefore, using the relevant discourse development patterns according to genres helps increase logic and preciseness in the demonstration of the discourse.

9. Using discourse knowledge to increase DC

DC also includes the ability to analyze discourses through knowledge of discourse, that is, discourse analysis ability. With certain discourse analysis ability, one can not only interpret and construct discourses, but also increase his/her appreciation ability, aesthetic taste and humanistic quality through examining and studying the structural features of different discourse, to develop the ability to analyze and resolve problems.

Obviously, DC involves various aspects of language competence, and is a vital part of language competence. Without the participation of language competence, language competence will be pale, even incomplete and partial.

DC has many characteristics, and its realization depends on the grammatical competence, pragmatic competence, textual competence, language competence and social competence. In this sense, DC is not completely consistent with the meaning of "comprehensive language ability" China carries on at present. The former advocates the view of "language as discourse", which is proposed by McCarthy & Carter (1994). They regard that discourse is a basic unit of language and teaching of language also should depend on discourse. [14] The latter emphasizes the integration of listening and speaking skills, and unity of instrument and humanism of language.

III. EFFECTIVE TRAINING STRATEGIES OF ENGLISH DC

The cultivation of English discourse competence can be based on the following aspects:

1. Improving teachers' understanding of DC and discourse teaching

Teachers should first realize that the purpose of learning English is not only to cultivate students' communicative competence. More important is, to cultivate their comprehensive language quality. DC is part of the comprehensive quality of the language; therefore, teachers should understand the discourse connotation and understand that DC is the key ability of compound talents. In teaching and evaluation, teachers should regard the discourse ability as an important indicator of requirement and assessment, and develop a sense of discourse-based teaching.

Because teachers are accustomed to the traditional teaching concepts and teaching modes, and if discourse-based instructional approach is implemented, first, the problem of awareness should be resolved.

Teachers should further study to realize the nature of "language as discourse", and understand that only applying discourse-based teaching approach, can learners' DC improve. Besides, only teachers deepen the understanding of DC, can they abandon the traditional teaching ideas and teaching modes, and fully implement the discourse-based teaching reform.

2. Strengthening training to increase teachers' DC

Firstly, colleges and universities should train their English teachers to make them obtain necessary discourse knowledge and DC. It is an important content of DC to be able to construct coherent discourse; therefore, it is their vital task for college English teachers to master cohesive and coherent devices and increase their DC. Cohesion and coherence constitute the most substitutive characteristics of DC; thus, English teachers must master cohesive and coherent means of discourse, such as reference, transitivity, register, genre, semantic structure, and theme-rheme model, etc. Secondly, they should distinguish spoken features from written ones, knowing talk-turn skills in conversation and paragraph development patterns in written discourses, such as exemplification, cause and effect analysis, comparison and contrast, process analysis, problem-solving, etc. Thirdly, they should obtain the relevant knowledge about social-cultural context, especially the knowledge about generic potential theory. Fourthly, they should be familiar with the relevant academic English, satisfying the needs of cultivating inter-disciplinary talents. Finally, they also need to master the theories and methods of discourse analysis, to develop generic awareness in the particular context, and to be able to carry on discourse analysis in instruction

3. Compiling teaching materials with the features of focusing on DC

The current teaching materials, including teaching materials for English majors, virtually regard the language knowledge obtaining and language skills training as the main line. Under the influence of the task-based syllabus, more language practices have been added to English teaching materials, which has a positive effect on promoting students' communicative competence. The system of some teaching materials is, to a certain extent, related to the level of discourse teaching, but because the teaching idea has not turned to "language as discourse", compilation of teaching materials is only keeping an eye on the "level of discourse", but actually, not the true teaching materials highlighting DC, which, therefore, can not completely meet the need of implementing discourse-based teaching approach. Just as Kaplan & Knutson（1993）pointed out, as an important aspect of effective teaching, DC is ignored during the textbook compiling. [8] We can say, so far, no textbooks are available aiming at developing learners' DC in China; therefore, educational departments should invite experts to compile English teaching materials with features of focusing on cultivating DC, to meet the need of teaching reform.

4. Carrying on Discourse Teaching Approach-based Instructional Reform

Colleges and universities should actively carrying on discourse-based instructional reform, and regard it as factor in the instructional evaluation. Special leading groups of teaching reform should be constituted in English majors, guiding and organizing the relevant teaching reform and research, and Coordinating and resolving the problems in the curriculum reform. Implementing the new approach puts forward higher request to the colleges and teachers; however, it is not realistic to request all the English teachers to do so in short time. A secure way is to "take the pilot first', that is, conducting tests at selected points in certain courses, such as spoken English, English reading, or English writing, etc. Then based on the pilot, the reform will gradually spread so as to share experience, reduce blindness and increase the effectiveness of instruction.

IV. CONCLUSION

DC is a part of language competence, whose connotation and that of communicative competence and pragmatic competence overlap in some sense. Therefore, the relationships between them need examining for clarification. In addition, more complicatedly, parameters should be set in the items of Instruction and Evaluation in English Syllabus for English Major of Colleges and Universities in China. While the parameters are established, the range, degree and the normalization of description all should be taken into account carefully. These aspects need English educationists and experts to further examine, and can be reflected in *the Revised English Syllabus for English Major of Colleges and Universities.*

REFERENCES

[1]   J.P. Wang, Discourse Model-based TEFL and Cultivation of Students' Oral Discourse Competence. Heilongjiang Researches on Higher Education, 2009(11):194-196.
[2]   Y.W. Guo, Construction of Discourse Competence in the Teaching of English Reading Comprehension. Journal of Yunmeng, 2004(6):114-115.
[3]   Y.C. Yang, Discourse Competence vs. Cognitive Ability: Do Second Language Learners Write the Way They Think? Teaching English in China, 2006(2):20-26.

[4]   Y.M. Gao, LD-based Assessment of Discourse Competence. Foreign Language Education, 2003(5:65-68.
[5]   Y. Zhang & L.J. Luo, Designing a Model of Multimedia Integrated English Couseware Targeting on Discourse Competence Cultivation. Computer-assisted Foreign Language Education. 2007(118):47-5.
[6]   P. Zhu, Laying a Solid Foundation in English and Develop ability to Use the Language. Foreign Language World. 2002(1):11-16.
[7]   X.T. Cheng, A Discourse-based Approach to Language Teaching. Foreign Language Teaching Abroad. 2005(1):8-16.
[8]   M. A. Kaplan & E. Knutson, Where Is the Text? Discourse Competence and the Foreign Language Textbook. Mid-Atlantic Journal of Foreign Language Pedagogy, vol.1 1993:167-176 Spr.
[9]   B. Hatim, *Communication across Cultures: Translation Theory and Contrastive Text Linguistics*. Shanghai: Shanghai foreign Language Education Press, 2001.
[10]   V. K. Bhatia, *Worlds of Written Discourse*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2008.
[11]   Y. Sun, Cultivation of Discourse Competence in College English Teaching. Journal of Shaanxi Normal University, 1998(6):170-173.
[12]   Q.F. Wen, English Oral Testing and Teaching. Shanghai: Shanghai foreign Language Education Press, 1999.
[13]   X.Y. Zhang & Z.W. Li, Increasing Students' Discourse Competence in College English Teaching. Journal of Language and Literature Studies. 2007(15):106-110.
[14]   M. McCarthy & R. Carter, *Language as Discourse: Perspective for Language Teaching*. London: Longman，1994.