A Critique on Effects of Discourse Structure Graphic Organizers on EFL Reading Comprehension

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Abstract. Discourse structure graphic organizers (DSGOs) is a popular strategy in EFL teaching both in reading and writing. However, this method should be criticized on its use and the effects in the real teaching context in China. This paper analyzes the strategy: Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-to-World in the teaching in Chinese college student as EFL learners, and supports its significance both in teaching and learning context among college-level EFL students (non-English majors) in a Chinese university.

Introduction

Reading comes alive when we recognize how the ideas in a text connect to our experiences and beliefs, events happening in the larger world, our understanding of history, and our knowledge of other texts. In reading research, discourse structure awareness is perceived as an important component of a reader’s overall comprehension abilities (Pearson & Fielding, 1991; Trabasso & Bouchard, 2002; Jiang, 2012). Discourse structure graphic organizers (DSGO) is a popular strategy in EFL teaching both in reading and writing. Its theoretical foundation was based on constructivist theories including Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy, Piaget’s developmental theory, and Vygotsky’s theory of zone of proximal development. In reading, schema theory indicates that schema is about how we know interacts with what is written to achieve understanding, which means that the prior knowledge can make a person understand the new knowledge, so discourse structure awareness plays an important role in reading comprehension. To help student to do EFL reading effectively, the author criticizes the research, Effects of discourse structure graphic organizers on EFL reading comprehension, conducted by Xiangying Jiang, associate professor, West Virginia University United States. (Published in Reading in a Foreign Language April 2012, Volume 24, No. 1 ISSN 1539-0578 pp. 84-105)

Text

It is a fact that there is a great lack of empirical investigations on the effects of graphic organizers (GO) research on English text comprehension among ESL learners. Therefore, a need for more empirical study related to this topic is obvious. This study investigated the effects of a 16-week reading instruction program with discourse structure graphic organizers (DSGOs) on the development of English reading comprehension among college-level EFL students (non-English majors) in a Chinese university. A DSGO completion test and a TOEFL reading comprehension test were employed in pretest, posttest and (7-week) delay test. The results showed that the DSGO instruction significantly improved discourse comprehension, and the effect was retained 7 weeks after. Significant improvement was also observed in the general reading ability in the immediate posttest, but the effect did not persist in the delayed posttest. These findings apply to both the first and third semester students.

Text-to-Text

In essence, Jiang believes that discourse structure graphic organizers (DSGOs) facilitating reading are based on schema theory and genre-related principles. Schema is defined as the knowledge
represented in the form of general mental structures. Forms (or patterns) and structures are the key
words in this concept. Discourse structures, also known as text structures, are defined as “knowledge
structures and basic rhetorical patterns in texts” (Grabe, 2003, Jiang, 2012). These can be categorized
as formal schema. In reading, schema theory indicates that schema is about how we know interacts
with what is written to achieve understanding, which means that the prior knowledge can make a
person understand the new knowledge, so discourse structure awareness plays an important role in
reading comprehension. A fact is discourse structures or the basic rhetorical patterns comparatively
limited, and this limitation makes method of exhaustion work in this case. In another word, all the
main structures can be taught explicitly, comparison-contrast, cause-effect, problem-solution,
definition, classification, argument, description, procedure, and narrative episodes, etc. By doing so,
the students discourse structure awareness can be cultivated, and one of the major functions of
consciousness was to allow an individual to generate specific phenomenologically experienced
representations from unconscious generic schemas.” (Brewer et al.1984). Consciousness can be taken
the same as awareness here. This can make the unclear structure of the difficult information clear
during reading through referring to the certain genres, which will enhance reading comprehension to a
great extent. So Jiang (2012) also reiterates that once students know these limited ways that texts are
organized, “they will be able to better understand the coherence and logic of the information being
presented, and they will be able to locate the main ideas and distinguish them from less important
information” (Grabe & Gardner, 1995). A conclusion can be drawn that the research are largely based
on the schema and genre related theories.

Using Text-to-Text strategy in reading: the following questions can be asked to induce the prior
reading related to the text they are reading, and to create connections that readers make between the
text they are reading and another text, including books, authors, poems, scripts, songs and even
movies.

How do the ideas in this text remind you of another text (story, book, movie, song, etc)? and
answer one of the following statements:

- What I just read reminds me of (story/book/movie/song) because…
- The ideas in this text are similar to the ideas in because…
- The ideas in this text are different than the ideas in because…

In doing so, discourse structures or the basic rhetorical patterns can be explicit, because texts are
generally organized following certain basic rhetorical patterns (Hoey, 2001; Mohan, 1986; Singer,
1990; Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983) and they usually fall into the following categories: comparison-contrast, cause-effect, problem-solution, definition, classification, argument, description, procedure, and narrative episodes, etc. Hence, students will become readers with GO
awareness and can better understand the coherence and logic of the information they are reading in
the text, and they will be able to locate the main ideas and distinguish them from details as well.
Also, students can relate what they are doing with what they have read to compare or contrast and
apply their prior knowledge to new knowledge.

Text-to-Self

In fact, though personally I do not feel comfortable to use graphic organizer to analyze a reading,
I may probably use GO in planning writing. As a reader, I believe a complete essay serve a whole
purpose. I do not like the feeling of cutting an essay into pieces, no matter what tools it might be used,
outline, flowchart, tree diagram or matrix, so I feel awkward to follow the GO completion test. I
think there are two possible reasons. One is I myself am not a good reader with the required schema,
so I avoid using it. The other reason is culture. Compare with English writing, Chinese writing is
very flexible in form and meaning-oriented. There is logic which you need to find the meaning and
the whole purpose with the big picture instead of with pieces of the essay. I intuitively feel that my
students may share the similar situation.

This research and its literature review have changed my opinion. I found GO is very useful,
especially when reader deal with a challenging reading. GO can help readers follow the
organization of an essay more easily, without any loss of important information as indicated in the
related researches. With a consideration of cultural factors, it even makes more sense to teach Chinese students explicitly the genres and GO awareness. As a teacher, I myself must improve the correspondent explicitly knowledge to do so.

Due to the different culture and rhetorical patterns, one of the major challenges L2 learners face is trying to understand how complex L2 academic reading materials are organized, especially when the rhetorical conventions of L2 texts can differ from those of L1 texts (Grabe & Stoller, 2011, Jiang, 2012).

Using Text-to-Self strategy in reading: the following questions can be asked to induce the prior experiences of students from their life and create the connections that readers make between text and their past experiences or background knowledge.

How do the ideas in this text relate to your own life, ideas, and experiences?
And answer one of the following statements:
What I just read reminds me of the time when I…
I agree with/understand what I just read because in my own life…
I don’t agree with what I just read because in my own life…

In doing so, students have to examine cultural factors which influence their reading comprehension. with the genres and GO awareness, students should compare and contrast English and Chinese rhetorical patterns and they should consciously identify the difference and thinking, and then realize more effective ESL reading, and they possibly criticize what have known with what they are learning.

Text-to-World

The reason I choose this paper is that this research is done in a Chinese university, the similar context makes research procedure, methodology are easier to examine, the follow-up researches more convenient, and the findings are more convincing, and therefore the pedagogical implication more practical, so no matter the similar research or the pedagogical implication are feasible to a great extent. This also has changed my idea of teaching reading. I will focus more on the discourse structure graphic organizers (DSGOs) to cultivate the students’ discourse structure awareness. But I find a problem with our textbooks. New Horizon (the second version) serials, the textbooks we use in my university, include DSGOs such as flow charts and diagrams, to help students have a clearer picture of the articles they read. But every unit differs in terms of discourse structure, so DSGO is just used to analyze the structure of how an essay or paragraph is organized. It is more like a disposable tool, used just for once, and I would rather consider it as introduction a discourse structure, and this is apparently not enough for cultivating students’ discourse structure awareness, which needs a period (two weeks at least for example in Alvermann and Boothby, 1986) of treatment for a certain genre or discourse structure. So, I will probably arrange the reading with the units of same discourse structure in a sequence so as to reinforce the effect of treatment until the awareness of certain genre is effectively fostered.

Using Text-to-World strategy in reading: the following questions can be asked students to induce the insight grained from the reading, to create connections that readers make between the text and the bigger issues, events, or concerns of society and the world at large.

How do the ideas in this text reading relate to the larger world—past, present and future. And answer one of the following statements:
What I just read makes me think about (event from the past) because…
What I just read makes me think about (event from today related to my own community, nation or world) because…
What I just read makes me wonder about the future because…

In doing so, students can appreciate the differences of culture and the different patterns of ESL reading. They can compare and contrast what they have read with what they are reading, and review or projection what they will be in future reading context. Besides Chinese, their mother language, English, which are more widely used, present ideas in different ways, which may also demonstrate another side of the world.
Conclusion

Developing students into critical readers and writers is a complicated process of self-discovery, literary interpretation, and textual renderings that stem from traditional literary explication while merging student connections throughout the reading and writing process, and all the main structures can be taught explicitly, which play an vital role how students make meaning during the reading process through the formation of literary awareness and how students bridge literary awareness into the writing process in narrative construction. Throughout the reading and writing process through literary texts in a way that supported individualized reading and writing instruction. To sum up, this research gives an insight of the significance DSGO in teaching reading, and its pedagogical implications are also very important and effective in EFL teaching and reading in the real teaching context at university level in China.

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