

Presentation Reflections

The well-hidden key: A workshop report

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Workshop: Raising Discourse Awareness: Practical Applications

Presenters: John Campbell-Larsen and Stuart Cunningham

Discourse is the eccentric uncle of language classes; lots of fun to deal with when he's around, but out of sight and out of mind during the humdrum routines of daily life. When he does show up, there is a flurry of adjustment and adulation, then he drops off the radar for a while. "Discourse? Oh, yeah; well, I deal with it when I have to, but not on a regular basis....."

In a superlative workshop, one that truly lived up to its sub-title, Campbell-Larsen and Cunningham presented their audience not only with useable Monday-morning-type lessons, but also with a deeper understanding of why discourse should not be treated as the occasional visitor, but rather as a key figure in the line-up of English classroom concerns.

Showing, not telling

One of the strengths of the workshop was the presenters' choice of audience-participation tasks; they strove to show, not tell, the attendees how the students experience discourse elements of language. For example, to open the workshop (after a somewhat uninspiring but

brief review of various definitions of discourse), Campbell-Larsen read two texts aloud and asked us to judge which one was a collection of random sentences and which an actual text. When most of the audience had correctly decided that the second selection was the text, we were asked to give our reasons for the decision.

This introductory task was illuminating in two ways. Being forced to hear, rather than read, the selections—though it made it quite difficult (the ‘coherent’ text was actually the copyright information that follows the title and author of a book, not the most obvious text in the world, even to a bunch of English teachers)—gave us a better sense of the level of difficulty the students might have with such an exercise. It was noteworthy, too, to hear the different ways in which participants talked about the textual elements that separated coherent discourse from random text. We often do not share a common meta-language in such settings, and Campbell-Larsen and Cunningham were very skilled in not forcing a lot of new terminology on us. After all, our students will have even less meta-language than we do, and teaching them new ways of talking about language is best done through participation rather than labeling.

Genre and task-type

Following this awareness-raising exercise, the presenters showed us some classroom-tested activities that help learners (a) understand what role discourse plays in natural language use among real speakers and (b) engage with the language in ways that could boost their fluent use of discourse elements.

A clear link was made between task-type and the use of typical discourse structure. A common one identified by the presenters is Situation/Problem/Solution/Evaluation:

- Last summer, I wanted to go to USJ. **situation**
- The thing was I had no money. **problem**

- So what I did was get a job at the local Lawsons. **solution**
- I saved enough money and had a great time there with my friends. **evaluation**

The presenters suggested activities to practice appropriate discourse structures with familiar language-practice tasks. None of the suggestions was radically new or unfamiliar; indeed, as was pointed out, they can be found in many communicative, notional-functional textbooks. But while the books tend to take a situational/grammatical focus, the workshop demonstrated that in many cases it is the discourse structure of the task, and not the grammar or function, that best serves the competent speaker.

For example, when a friend asks for advice (a common speaking exercise in many communicative textbooks), the discourse structure mentioned above is perfectly appropriate: Speaker A presents the **Situation** and **Problem** ("It's my girlfriend's birthday next week, but the thing is, I don't have much money. Any ideas?"); and Speaker B provides the **Solution**: ("How about that new Indian restaurant, the Dancing Elephant. It's really cheap, and they specialize in tandoori goat. It's fantastic!"). In reply, to close the interaction, Speaker A iterates the **Evaluation** comment: ("Great! My girlfriend loves goat!")

This simple example clearly showed that discourse is not a decorative trim that we should apply only when we have a bit of extra time, but actually a powerful communicative tool we can equip students with.

Other types of utterances, for example anecdotes, call for different discourse structures. Several useful examples were provided that help students practice the use of discourse markers or logical connectors ("unfortunately," "however," "but then," "on the other hand," etc.) to signal the genre of the text and at the same time more appropriately complete the task.

When is a question not a question?

Discourse by definition concerns itself with supra-sentential elements of utterances and texts; by limiting themselves to sentence-level meanings and structures, textbooks miss valuable opportunities to help students learn how to recognize, and use, topical clues that are only visible in longer stretches of text. A powerful illustration of this was given by Cunningham, who passed out a deceptively simple worksheet. He pointed out that his students—even the very fluent ones—find it nearly impossible to complete the worksheet correctly. It must be said that even for us in the audience it took a high level of concentration to do!

Here's an example of one of the items from the worksheet:

Q: "Have you ever eaten kangaroo?"

As Cunningham pointed out, most textbooks teach the *present perfect* + *ever* as a structural issue that can be practiced by talking about things we have done in our life. Fair enough. But the discourse reality is that we more often use this structure to introduce new, or unexpected, topics. So a "textbook" answer to the question above would be limited to a yes or no, plus perhaps a clarifying comment:

A1: "Yes, I have. It was delicious!" or

A2: "No, I haven't, and I don't want to."

Cunningham stressed that there is a more conversationally correct answer to this question. The unspoken rules of English discourse require the listener/responder to explicitly flag the hidden topic, in this case, "odd or exotic food" (or possibly "things eaten only in Australia") and to respond to that as well as to the request for factual information:

A3: "No! But I did eat fried bugs once, when I was visiting central Africa." or

A4: "No, but I've had a barbecued Mars bar!"

Cunningham's worksheet was a first step towards actually having that conversation; the task was to write down a topic, not an answer. The questions themselves were not particularly difficult, but the task was confounding. We were told, do NOT answer the question; instead, identify the TOPIC introduced by the question. Many of us struggled to follow these instructions.

Decades ago, when I was doing my initial TESL training, I remember reading about the dreaded effects of transfer in second language acquisition. One transfer effect that has dropped off the radar since then was "transfer of training." Routine that is too strongly ingrained means that a learner may respond automatically (and thus perhaps inappropriately) to a given contextual stimulus. Being part of a group of professional language teachers desperately trying NOT to answer questions on a worksheet of questions was very interesting indeed. If we could barely escape the Power of the Question Mark, what chance do our students have?

Conclusion: The hidden key to communicative success

While the general growth of communicatively-oriented language teaching and learning in Japan is probably a good thing, the lack of associated critical training in how to use, respond to, and look "inside" a worksheet means that too many useful moments of learning are probably wasted. If one's constant focus is on questions as stimulus mechanisms for answers, then seeing questions as something else, i.e., flags for topics, comes hard. I found this exercise particularly inspirational, and it is one—out of many excellent activities presented that morning—that I will certainly adapt and introduce to my own

discussion classes.

For many jaded conference goers, it is always delightful to leave a presentation not only impressed, but also inspired. I found Campbell-Larsen and Cunningham's practical and insightful workshop a rare experience—it made me want to rush out and study discourse patterns in Japanese! Finally, the key!

References

Readers who would like to read more about discourse analysis, and the use of discourse research for language teaching, can peruse these sources:

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