



EXPLICIT DISCOURSE STRUCTURE TEACHING AND IMPLICATIONS FOR READING INSTRUCTION

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Abstract. EFL reading teachers and researchers have searched for effective methods to equip learners with efficient reading strategies, one of which concerns awareness-raising and exploration of discourse structures. That means making students metacognitively aware of strategies and techniques that promote reading comprehension in terms of the macro-level characteristics of the text. Research has pointed out the indispensable roles of text structure knowledge in promoting an efficient strategy that enhances reading comprehension. This paper reports the results of a project on explicit discourse structure teaching and its effects exploration. On the basis of the theoretical framework offered by researchers in the world, a pilot college reading course was carried out with the deliberate instruction of discourse structures and discourse awareness-raising activities towards different text patterns, transitional words, frame markers, and signalling languages in one semester. The results demonstrated that the metacognitive awareness of discourse structure and the explicit teaching of textual features facilitate students' reading comprehension. The implications have also been used to devise methods to reinforce the possible application of discourse knowledge instruction in the tertiary language classrooms at a more metacognitive level.

Keywords. text structure, discourse structure, reading instruction, teaching reading skills

1. Introduction

There has been an increasing need for foreign languages learning and acquisition all over the world in the trend of globalization in the past decades. In learning a foreign language, learners are expected to master four language skills while enriching their knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Reading comprehension, especially in the tertiary education setting, has been an essential skill for job-related tasks in the future. Therefore, both teachers and learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) strive for strategies that enhance effective reading comprehension.

Regarding effective reading strategies, many language researchers and practitioners have outlined many kinds of categorization, characteristics and possible application in language classrooms all over the world (Kern, 1989; Carrel, Pharis, and Liberto, 1989; Grabe, 2009). These

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authors have discussed the positive results of explicit teaching reading strategies and the improvements in reading comprehension capabilities of EFL learners, and claim that there are several ways to approach teaching reading through discourse-structure awareness instruction, for instance, types of genres, signalling/ discourse markers, or graphic organizers. On the basis of these theoretical frameworks, an application has been devised for the second-year English-major reading classes of University of Foreign Languages, Hue University, Vietnam (HUFL) to investigate the effects of explicit discourse structure teaching on changing their perceptions about reading. This article reports the results of the project.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Definitions of discourse structure

Discourse structure, or text structure, refers to the coherent organization of information within a written text. Meyer and Rice (1982) defined discourse structure as the ideas of a text that are interrelated to convey a message to the reader. According to Ornstein (1994), text structure is the critical aspect of the text, as it defines how information organization and the verbal and textual cues are combined to unify the text. Other terms such as text structure, discourse pattern, text type, rhetorical organization, and top-level structure are sometimes used interchangeably with discourse structure (Jiang & Grabe, 2007).

2.2. Teaching reading on the basis of the knowledge of discourse structure

In reading research, discourse structure awareness is perceived as an important component of a reader's overall comprehension abilities (Pearson & Fielding, 1991; Trabasso & Bouchar, 2002). Reading researchers believe that readers' awareness of different kinds of text structure is a useful strategy for better comprehension (Pearson & Duke, 2002).

Research has shown that the instruction of discourse structure can increase comprehension and learning (Grabe, 2003). While maintaining the concept that text structure refers to how information in that text is organized and communicated to targeted readers, lots of research has reinforced that providing knowledge of text organizations for students can produce a number of potentially desired outcomes in enhancing their reading comprehension skills. Being prepared with text structure awareness, readers can find it easier to direct their attention to major points, find the connections between ideas, make more precise predictions, and control comprehension during their reading process. When the ways students think or interpret information are comparable to those that the writer employs, it is highly likely that they can comprehend the text with fewer difficulties. Failing to realize the structure of the text or identify signals of certain types of text structures, in fact, can hinder students from having a grasp of the text. In a word, it is essential that students be equipped with text structure awareness to fully understand the text

meaning in a more effective way (Meyer & Poon, 2001; Akhondi, et al. , 2011; Spivey and King, 1989; Meyer et al., 1980; Van Dijk&Kintsch, 1983; Carrell, 1989; Meyer and Freedle, 1984, as cited in Rabani, S. et al.,2015)

At the tertiary level, students often deal with academic reading, which involves several subtle cognitive processes. If these processes are not correctly applied, students' decoding abilities will be negatively affected in various ways. Knowing the differences between text structures, therefore, helps students to understand the meaning. The teaching of text structure is important for many reasons. On the basis of the overview of research into developing reading skills through raising students' awareness of discourse structure, it is apparent that up to date, not much research has focused on the objectives of college students or English-major students, and more surprisingly, very little research on the topic has been conducted in Vietnam. This encourages the writers to carry out this research to find out whether the reading skills of English-major students can be developed through raising awareness of discourse structure. Based on the research findings, proper implications for teaching reading skills at tertiary level can be inferred.

3. Research design

3.1. Participants

The setting of the research is one Reading 4 class at HUFL within a time frame of ten weeks. Thirty students participated in the project. They were second-year English-major students, who have completed the other three Reading courses in previous semesters (i.e., Reading 1,2,3, equivalent to CEFR levels A1, A2, and B1). For Reading 4 course objectives, they were to fulfil the B2 level of CEFR in Reading.

3.2. Research instruments

The research used three main instruments, which helped provide data from triangular approaches.

First, pre-course and post-course questionnaires (*pre-questionnaire and post-questionnaire* hereafter) were administered to participants at the beginning and upon ending of the pilot course. The pre-questionnaire includes 18 questions under three main categories, namely, the reality of students' reading practice, such as material choices, difficulties in reading, and strategies often used to enhance reading comprehension; the reality of reading classes at HUFL and students' current knowledge of Discourse Structure; their expectation of this approach. The post-study questionnaire (16 questions) aims at testing students' knowledge of Discourse Structure after being taught explicitly, impacts of this knowledge on students' reading comprehension, students' difficulties when acquiring Discourse Structure knowledge, and their sugges-

tions to improve reading skill teaching and learning through Discourse Structure awareness approach.

Next, interviews with teachers and students were utilized. Apart from interviews with teachers to obtain their opinions of the feasibility, benefits, and suggestions of raising Discourse Structure awareness, which are not mentioned here in this paper because of scope limit, interviews with four students in the class where pilot teaching was carried out provided more detailed and in-depth information about their attitudes, perceptions, and difficulties. All questions in the interviews were open-ended to seek extended answers from the interviewees and supplement data obtained from the observations and the questionnaires.

Finally, the pilot teaching approach was used as a process-based data collection instrument. Selected lectures on Discourse Structure, and several exercises and assignments to facilitate students' application of Discourse Structure knowledge on reading activities were implemented throughout the course. Frequent feedbacks were collected from both the teacher and students.

Research procedures

At the beginning of the research stage, students were asked to complete the pre-study questionnaires to provide information on the reality of their reading practice and reading classes at HUFL. In the following ten weeks, these students attended the Reading lessons, which follow the subject syllabus. Besides textbook reading lessons, students were intensively provided with knowledge and practice of Discourse Structure by the key researcher. Several lessons and practice exercises were given to students during the ten-week time frame. Feedback sessions were organized in between the weeks so that the teacher and students can discuss their grasp of knowledge, progress, and possible constraints that need consulting. When the ten-week course was over, the students completed the post-questionnaires to validate data on the effects of the explicit teaching of Discourse Structure. All information gathered was noted down and arranged into tables, charts, and data blocks. The information was then ready for assessing.

4. Results and discussion

The knowledge of Discourse Structure provided throughout the intervention period not only enriched the students' knowledge of this field but also had significant impacts on their reading comprehension. These impacts are illustrated through their improvements in students' attitudes toward reading and their ability to use reading strategies.

4.1. Changes in students' attitudes toward reading

After the pilot teaching reading course, the majority of students develops more positive attitudes towards reading (Table 1).

Overall, the proportion of the students who generally have better attitudes towards reading upon completing the course constitutes more than 70%. Eighty per cent of the students reported that they enjoyed reading more and felt less frustrated when reading. More than 85% felt more confident and motivated to read. More surprisingly, nearly 95% thought they became more involved, as well as having clearer goals when reading.

Table 1. Students' post-course attitudes towards reading ($N=30$)

Category	Totally agree, %	Agree, %	Disagree, %	Totally disagree, %
Enjoy reading more	6.7	73.3	20.0	0
Be more confident	16.7	70.0	13.3	0
Be more actively involved in reading	16.7	76.6	6.7	0
Be more comfortable	13.4	60.0	23.3	3.3
Find reading easier	13.4	63.3	23.3	0
Be more motivated	26.7	60.0	13.3	0
Have reading purposes	26.7	66.7	3.3	3.3
Feel less frustrated	16.7	63.3	20.0	0

Having acquired the skill of recognizing discourse structure, the students had more supporting tools other than just decoding words by words, thus feeling more confident and interested in reading. Besides the knowledge of Discourse Structure, the students also received teaching support and feedback, which enhanced their motivation to read. From class observation, apparently, the teacher always emphasized the purpose of completing a reading comprehension task. Hence, the students could become familiar with reading with a set purpose.

This is a new finding because previous studies generally focused on identifying improvements in reading comprehension by comparing pre-test and post-test results (Grabe et al., 2014; Zarratiet al., 2014). Few studies dealt with the impact of teaching Discourse Structure explicitly on students' attitude towards reading – a significant issue. Positive attitudes toward reading and a healthy reading self-assurance are major objectives of the reading curriculum in most countries. The students who enjoy reading usually read more frequently and more widely, which, in turn, broadens their reading experience and improves their comprehension. Therefore, these results support the hypothesis that Discourse Structure awareness has positive impacts on students' reading comprehension.

4.2. Changes in students' reading comprehension

According to Carrell (1988), students should be taught reading strategies explicitly. The direct and clear provision of knowledge of Discourse Structure improves both students' attitudes towards reading and their reading proficiency. Improvement in reading comprehension is shown in the effectiveness of using different reading strategies, as illustrated in the following table 2.

Table 2. Changes in students' reading strategies (N=30)

Category	Disagree, %	Agree, %	Totally agree, %
Guess words on the basis of context and structure you have identified	10.0	53.3	36.7
Save time by ignoring information unrelated to main ideas	3.3	46.7	50.0
Do reading tasks faster and more correctly	10.0	40.0	50.0
Increase information memorization	3.3	53.3	43.3
Increase focus during the whole process	13.3	53.3	33.3
Increase reading speed	3.3	63.3	33.3
Use texts to learn vocab, grammar, and writing style	23.3	50.0	26.7
Differentiate between main ideas and details	16.7	63.3	20.0
Understand complex long texts	3.3	70.0	26.7
Make inferences more accurately	0	66.7	33.3
Identify main ideas more accurately	0	63.3	36.7
Maintain expectation during reading	26.7	63.3	10.0
Understand coherence and cohesion	0	66.7	33.3
Guess topic and message more accurately	3.3	66.7	30.0

Overall, the majority of students who were taught Discourse Structure knowledge believed that they could use reading strategies more successfully. All of them reported that they could grasp the coherence and cohesion of the text better, as well as identify main ideas and make inferences more correctly. More than 95% agreed that they could increase their reading speed and save time by ignoring information unrelated to the text's main ideas, understand complex long texts better, and guess the text topic and the message more accurately thanks to Discourse Structure knowledge. Most significantly 50% of the participants strongly believed that being aware of Discourse Structure, they read the tasks faster with more accuracy.

When being interviewed, the students of the experimental group were enthusiastic to talk about their progress. According to student C, "Being able to identify different text structures, I can read faster because I can understand the relationships between ideas in the text". Student B said that

“Knowledge of Discourse Structure is very important, especially when I have to read a complicated long text because I can have an overall picture of the whole text.”

Teacher Zgave this explanation for this finding:

“Having a sensible understanding of the text structure, the students can predict the whole flow of the text through its signaling language. In particular contexts, this knowledge facilitates students’ prediction skills and comprehension ability as well. This, in turns, promotes students’ accomplishment of the reading tasks and gradually forms more effective reading skills.”

This finding further reinforces the hypothesis of the positive impact of Discourse Structure awareness on students’ reading ability. Unlike other studies, which only analyzed the test scores, this research aimed to explore the effects of this approach on the use of reading strategies. Using reading strategies successfully is an art; therefore, improvement in students’ use of reading strategies indicates the value of this research.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study reinforce a previous research’s findings, which show that students’ reading comprehension can be enhanced by awareness of discourse structure as well as discourse-structure instruction. From the results showing students’ better attitudes towards reading and their more effective use of various reading strategies, it can be concluded that teaching Discourse structure can lead to positive changes in students’ reading comprehension skills. Both teachers and students’ positive acknowledgement of and commitment to support the overt teaching of discourse structure to adult learners of EFL will result in enhanced reading skills. University students are believed to be fully aware of metacognitive skills and strategies, and they manage the acquisition of the language skills better than younger learners (i.e., secondary school students). It is hoped that teachers will become more concerned with this teaching approach and make an effort to bring more Discourse Structure awareness activities into classrooms. This effort will lead the students to the acquisition of better reading skills and to their mastery of other skills as well.

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