**TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICE   
OF APPLYING DISCOURSE ANALYSIS TO TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION AT UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, HUE UNIVERSITY**

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the results of a research project which investigates teachers' perceptions and practice of applying Discourse Analysis (DA) to teaching reading comprehension at University of Foreign Languages, Hue University. The participants in this research were 30 teachers of English, mainly from The Department of English and the Department of English for Specific Purposes, and 100 students randomly chosen among those who were taking reading classes of first-year English major. A multi-method approach combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches was employed to collect the data to answer the research questions. It can be drawn from the research results that DA brings some benefits to teaching Reading comprehension. Besides, there are certain difficulties including time constraint, choosing proper reading materials, different English language proficiency levels among students and other factors which teachers and students as well often encounter in the employment of DA. More importantly, some suggestions for teaching reading skills were thus offered to help teachers exploit DA and apply it in their teaching more effectively.

**Key words:** Reading comprehension, discourse, discourse analysis, teaching reading

1. **Introduction**

Reading can be considered one of the four fundamental language skills that an EFL learner must perform. Rivers (1981, p.147) stated that "reading is the most important activity in any language class, not only as a source of information and a pleasurable activity but also as a means of consolidating and extending one's knowledge of the language". However, Dubin (1982, p.125) assumed that the task of reading is a complex skill that contains a number of psychological, physical and social elements. Actually, it is not an easy skill since most of the learners have many reading issues. In practice, it is observed that EFL learners face significant difficulties preventing them from performing their reading tasks successfully. According to Gunning (2002), the inadequate knowledge of text type or text organization is one of the main reasons for poor performance in reading. If readers do not know what kind of the text is, such as letter, narrative, report or review, they will find it hard to follow and understand what the text is about. The fact that students cannot understand the rhetorical and functional meaning of sentences, or sentences with specific topics or involving cultural differences cause the difficulties in students’ learning to read (Wenquan, 2009). Another cause worth mentioning is that sometimes, EFL students are asked to read a text and merely answer the questions without being given any knowledge on the reading topic, the purpose, or the organization of the text (Truong, 2017). In fact, a majority of students may have little idea about genres and linguistic features encoded in the reading texts, which can facilitate their reading comprehension. As a result, students do not have a good comprehension of what they have been reading or always struggle with reading (Booth & Swart, 2004) and accordingly, they lose their motivation for learning reading comprehension, which exerts devastating impacts on their progress in other areas of English learning.

Discourse Analysis (DA) would be defined as the study of the relationship between language and its inter-textual, social and intercultural contexts in which it is used. The field of discourse analysis is very wide, but in regard to language teaching according to Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000), it is possible to define DA within five areas: cohesion, coherence, information structure, turn-taking, and critical discourse analysis. As far as teaching reading skills are concerned, the knowledge of DA helps to enable students to understand how people organize language in texts, textual features, and language choices. Students can, thereby, overcome the certain difficulties in reading and experience different ways to read as well as new opportunities to develop high levels of reading comprehension.

There has been some research into the effects of teaching English or teaching reading using DA. For example, Vahidi (2006) examined the influence of rhetorical patterns on reading comprehension; Tarone and Swierzbin (2009) conducted a discourse analysis of six learners of English as a second language from the University of Minnesota, Hashemi and Ghanizadeh (2012) carried out an experimental study to investigate the impact of integrating critical discourse analysis in reading classes. In the context of EFL in Vietnam, Truong (2017) did the research to identify whether knowledge of discourse structure can be applied to teaching reading skills to enhance students’ reading competence. The previous research into this area mainly focussed on a single tenet of DA or different skills; therefore, the feasibility and benefits of applying of DA’s tenets namely Cohesion, Coherence, Information Structure, Critical Discourse Analysis, and so on, in teaching reading for EFL students are still left to be further researched.

DA is not a new approach to teaching and learning English in the world. However, in the context of Vietnam, this approach has been recently used and integrated into some reading textbooks. Therefore, exploring teachers' perception and practice of applying this new approach to teaching reading comprehension is of importance because the findings will help evaluate the effectiveness of using DA to teaching reading skills. Furthermore, the study of teachers' practice can provide an insight into how teachersdeploy knowledge of DA to teach reading comprehension as well as what problems they may face.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate teachers’ perceptions of applying DA tenets, namely, Discourse Structure, Cohesion and Coherence, and Genres to teaching reading comprehension in their classroom practices, by examining how teachers’ perceptions of using DA in teaching reading are reflected in their classroom practices and what challenges they face when applying DA to teach reading comprehension, thereby working out solutions to tackle problems.

1. **Theoretical framework**

**2.1. Reading comprehension**

Reading comprehension has been defined in many different ways by many researchers. Having some similar ideas, Bloomfield (1933), Fries (1954), and some other linguists’ thought reading is to identify language units from the simple to the complex; reading is a simple and mechanical process of decoding (Kavanagh & Mattingly, 1972). Therefore, reading can be seen as an “interactive” process between a reader and a text which leads to automaticity (reading fluency). In this process, the reader interacts dynamically with the text as he/she tries to elicit the meaning and where various kinds of knowledge are being used: linguistic or systemic knowledge (through bottom-up processing) as well as schematic knowledge (through top-down processing).

**2.2. Discourse and Discourse Analysis**

Discourses which go beyond the level of conversation or discussion are particular ways of using language in particular situations. Discourses form what we can say, do and think; as a result, they determine the social consequences of our actions. According to Cameron (2001), discourses offer insights into social life and social relations.

In terms of Discourse Analysis, the organization of discourse can be considered as one of the central issues of discourse analysis. When investigating the three levels of discourse organization (cohesion, coherence, and genre), cohesion and coherence are analyzed in the individual texts. These texts belong to a certain genre, which places them into context. According to Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (1995, p.9), "discourse analysis is minimally the study of language in use that extends beyond sentences boundaries [...] which entails a more cognitive and social perspective on language use", those elements have a vital role to play in learning Reading comprehension skills.

The field of discourse analysis is significantly wide but this study focuses on some mains areas namely Cohesion and Coherence, Discourse Structure and Genres.

***2.2.1. Cohesion and Coherence***

***2.2.1.a Cohesion***

Halliday and Hasan (1976) divide cohesion into two major types of cohesive relation, namely grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion (Table 2.1).

**Table 2.1:** Types of Cohesion

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Cohesion | | | | |
| Grammatical Cohesion | | | Lexical Cohesion | |
| Reference | Exophoric [situation] | | Reiteration | Repetition |
| Endophoric [textual] | | Synonyms |
| Anaphoric  [to preceding text] | Cataphoric  [to the following text] | Superordinate |
| Substitution | | | General words |
| Ellipse | | | Collocation | |
| Conjunction | | |

Source: Adapted from Tsareva (2010, p.10)

***2.2.1.b Coherence***

Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) define coherence as "the quality that makes a text conform to a consistent worldview based on one's experience and culture or convention" (p.215). They also state that coherence is an interactive process involving the writer, the written text, and the reader. Addition to this, coherence “concerns the ways in which the components of the textual world, i.e. the configuration of concepts and relations which underlie the surface text, are mutually accessible and relevant” (Hoey, 1991, p.11).

***2.2.2. Discourse Structure***

Discourse structures, which are also known as text structures, are defined as the "knowledge structures or basic rhetorical patterns in texts" (Grabe, 2003, p.9). According to Nagy (2007), discourse structure awareness is considered as a type of metalinguistic awareness at the text and often is associated with a set of reading strategies such as identifying main ideas, organizational patterns in texts, and specific genre features of texts, and inferring connections among parts of the text. In brief, the text structure enables the reader to understand the author's purposes such as whether to inform the reader or persuade the reader. Therefore, readers rely on the rhetorical structures of the text to form a text model and background knowledge of text structures to form a situational model.

***2.2.3 Genres***

According to Hammond and Derewianka ( 2001), the term "genre" is applied in different contexts to refer to the convention of certain texts in certain cultures. Swales (1990) states that a genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. Genre analysis is the study of how language is used within a particular context. The aim of genre analysis is to identify how linguistic features are chosen by expert users of the genre to realize their communicative purpose and explain these choices in terms of social and psychological context.

In short, a full understanding of the context of a text can help to better understand the text, grasp the ideas that the author should convey, and accurately understand its implied meaning. The more the reader knows about the background cultural knowledge, the more profound meaning they can understand.

1. **Methodology**

Regarding participants, 30 teachers who have been teaching Reading comprehension from different Departments at HUFL, mainly ESP and English Department, were asked to complete the questionnaire showing their personal opinions about DA knowledge, students' difficulties in learning reading comprehension, teachers' DA applying to teaching reading comprehension and their suggestions to promote their students' reading comprehension by using DA. Apart from the teachers, 100 students including first-year, second-year and third-year students who are studying English at HUFL were also involved in the research. All of them were learning reading comprehension in classes taught by teachers who were chosen to interview. Therefore, they might share their own opinion on their teachers' reality of applying DA to teaching.

1. **Findings and discussion**

Discourse Analysis is fairly popular in language teaching; however, in the context of Vietnam, it seems to be new and has only recently applied in teaching and learning English in general, reading comprehension in particular. This research aims to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of applying DA to teaching Reading comprehension. Thereby, some workable suggestions are offered to make the application of DA in teaching Reading skills more effectively.

The results of teachers’ perceptions of the merits and demerits of using DA for teaching Reading comprehension are presented as follows.

**4.1. Teachers’ perceptions of benefits of using DA for teaching Reading comprehension**

**Chart 1:** Benefits of employing Discourse Structure in teaching Reading comprehension

In terms of Discourse Structure, over half of the teachers in the survey believed that applying this area to teaching Reading comprehension brought about some significant benefits to students. To be specific, 70% of teachers agreed that the introduction Discourse Structure helped students to focus on the main ideas. Likewise, the similar percentages of the responses stated that when Discourse Structure knowledge was introduced to all English-major students, they could know how to disguise main ideas and details. Furthermore, according to a large number of teachers, increasing students’ intensive concentration on the reading text and helping students gain greater control were also the benefits of teachers’ applying Discourse Analysis in general and Discourse Structure in particular (66% and 64% respectively). Some other benefits of DA knowledge were also agreed by over 50% of teachers. This finding is also supported by the results of research conducted by Williams (2007). Furthermore, reading instruction should also include discourse structure awareness among learners for more effective comprehension. Research has demonstrated that teaching discourse structure awareness has a strong impact on reading comprehension (Grabe, 2003).

**Chart 2:** Benefits of employing Cohesion and Coherence in teaching Reading comprehension

With respect to the benefits of Cohesion and Coherence, four-fifths of teachers believed that thanks to the knowledge of this area, students could understand the coherence and logic of the text. Following this, 73% stated that Cohesion and Coherence enabled students to make inference more accurately. Another interesting finding is that the same number of teachers (60%) thought that introducing this area knowledge allowed students to seize the theme and potential meaning of the text, foster a logical thinking ability to analyzing, summarizing and inducing and decrease reading time.

This result has been supported by a number of previous studies on the relationships between Coherence and Cohesive and Reading Comprehension (Wilawan, 2007; Qingyong& Fei, 2008).

**Chart 3:** Benefits of employing genres in teaching Reading comprehension

Regarding Genres, as demonstrated in chart 3, 80 % of teachers agreed that introducing knowledge of Genres helped students to increase their reading proficiency. Furthermore, it could be found that one of the highest appreciations was made towards enabling students to realize how authors organize their reading comprehension and to gain an understanding of the communicative purposes (70% and 66% respectively). Additionally, 53% of teachers believed that acquiring knowledge of this area was useful because it improved the flexibility in students thinking. In fact, a genre is crucial in reading comprehension in which the participants are more comfortable with the genres they are more familiar with (Ammon, 1987; Carrell, 1981; Johnson, 1981, 1982; Langer, Barolome, Vasquez, & Lucas, 1990; Shimoda, 1989). Therefore, thanks to teachers’ applying Genres to teaching reading skills, students can do their reading tests more easily and effectively.

**4.2. Teachers’ perceptions towards difficulties in the employment DA to teaching Reading comprehension**

Although knowledge of Discourse Analysis can have beneficial impacts on students’ reading comprehension, teachers and students still meet some certain challenges when approaching this knowledge.

The main difficulty teachers thought they could face in applying Discourse-based activities was the different levels of English language proficiency among students (54%). About 50% agreed that limited strategies of designing and applying Discourse-based tasks, and difficulty in forming students' habits of Discourse Analysis prior to handling Reading tasks were challenges teachers had to face. Additionally, time limitation in class and time consuming on preparation seemed to pose a serious problem to teachers' applying DA to teaching reading comprehension (43% and 36% respectively).

The results from the interview also supported the reality that limited time allowance indeed challenged teachers.

*“Time allotted is much shorter than time needed so we do not have enough time to introduce new knowledge to students.” (T1)*

*Additionally, some teachers agreed that "it took us a great deal of time to prepare Discourse-based activities, which is the reason why we just guided them some familiar techniques to save time" (T2, T3).*

In addition, from the class observation data, most of the observed lessons were neatly completed in a 45-minute period with a lot of activities in textbooks. Some textbooks into which discourse-based activities were integrated were so convenient for teachers to guide students in the class period. For others without discourse-related activities, teachers had to design activities on their own, which was a burden. In fact, some teachers cut some activities in textbooks to make room for applying DA to teaching reading comprehension. Others make use of revision periods to introduce some discourse knowledge to their students.

Apart from teachers, students also faced some problems with teachers’ applying DA to teaching Reading comprehension. 70% of teachers agreed that DA knowledge was so complicated for their students to acquire. Over 50% thought that students found DA knowledge was bored. Furthermore, a lack of metacognitive and a lack of practice were also perceived as difficulties which students had to face (approximately 51% and 50% respectively).

To sum up, in fact, there are some problems which students have to face including complicated knowledge, lack of metacognitive and boredom in their teachers' adaptation DA to teaching reading comprehension. Additionally, the interview results also show that most students find DA knowledge rather difficult for them to learn, so teachers have a tendency to choose useful and simple techniques to teach their students.

**4.3 Suggestions for improving students’ reading comprehension through an application of Discourse Analysis**

Some different suggestions are given to teachers with a view to helping students improve their reading comprehension. Most of the teachers in the survey agreed with teaching the students how to skim and scan and developing the student's linguistic knowledge (73% and 63% respectively). Furthermore, lower proportions of them showed their interest in the solutions of exposing learners to large quantities of meaningful and interesting L2 materials and asking them to predict text's content thanks to the title of a text. 50% of teachers gave their preferences for using different reading strategies for different genres of English passages, increasing students' interests in topics and relating the students' background knowledge of the topic. Drawing on the data analysis and discussion, a large number of valuable suggestions are worth teachers’ considerations to both make their teaching reading more effectively and help students boost their reading skills. In particular, most suggestions are related to materials, skimming and scanning techniques, and different strategies for different types of genre.

1. **Conclusion**

The teachers in the survey think that Discourse-based is a preeminent approach with a cascade of beneficial impacts its tenets (namely Discourse structure, Cohesion and Coherence, and Genres) exert on enhancing students’ reading skills. In terms of the benefits of Discourse structure, participants agree that it can help students to focus on the main ideas, disguise main ideas and details as well as increase their intense concentration on the reading text. With respect to Cohesion and Coherence, this area is believed to enable students to make inference more accurately, seize the theme and potential meaning of the text, and foster a logical thinking ability as well. Regarding Genres, most teachers think that introducing knowledge of Genres can help students to increase their reading proficiency, to realize how authors organize their reading comprehension and to gain a better understanding of communicative purposes. Meanwhile, teachers face some difficulties connected with students’ different English language proficiency levels, time constraints, and task choices in their application of DA in teaching Reading comprehension. Simultaneously, some problems students have to encounter in their teacher’ applying DA are worth mentioning, namely sophisticated knowledge, lack of metacognition and lack of practice. More importantly, some suggestions, especially for teachers, are offered to boost students' reading skill by applying DA.

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**NHẬN THỨC CỦA GIÁO VIÊN VÀ THỰC TẾ ÁP DỤNG**

**PHÂN TÍCH DIỄN NGÔN VÀO VIỆC DẠY HỌC ĐỌC HIỂU   
TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC NGOẠI NGỮ, ĐẠI HỌC HUẾ**

**Tóm tắt:** Nghiên cứu này trình bày kết quả điều tra về nhận thức của giáo viên và thực tế áp dụng phân tích diễn ngôn (DA) vào việc dạy đọc hiểu tại trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Huế. Đối tượng tham gia nghiên cứu này bao gồm 30 giáo viên tiếng Anh, chủ yếu là từ Khoa tiếng Anh và Khoa tiếng Anh chuyên ngành, và 100 sinh viên được lựa chọn ngẫu nhiên trong số những người đang tham gia các lớp học tiếng Anh năm đầu tiên. Nghiên cứu này kết hợp cả hai phương pháp định lượng và định tính để thu thập và xử lý số liệu. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy những lợi ích của việc áp dụng DA vào việc dạy Đọc hiểu. Bên cạnh đó, phương pháp này cũng mang lại những khó khăn nhất định bao gồm hạn chế về thời gian, lựa chọn các tài liệu đọc phù hợp, trình độ tiếng Anh khác nhau giữa các sinh viên và các yếu tố khác mà giáo viên và học sinh cũng thường gặp phải. Quan trọng hơn, nghiên cứu cũng đưa ra một số gợi ý cho việc dạy kỹ năng đọc để giúp giáo viên khai thác DA và áp dụng nó trong việc dạy học hiệu quả hơn.

**Từ khóa:** Đọc hiểu, diễn ngôn, phân tích diễn ngôn, dạy đọc hiểu.