**AN INVESTIGATION INTO TEACHERS’ PRACTICE OF APPLYING DISCOURSE ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES**

**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 investigated teachers' practice of applying Discourse Analysis to teaching reading comprehension at University of Foreign Languages, Hue University. The participants in this research were 30 teachers of English and 100 students randomly chosen among those who were taking reading classes of first-year English major. A multi-faced method combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches was employed to collect the data for the answer of the research questions. It can be drawn from the research results that Discourse Analysis brings definite benefits to teaching Reading comprehension in terms it helps maximize the potentials of students’ metacognitive use of language for the purpose of communication which is the main target of the language teaching and learning process. 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 Discourse Analysis. More importantly, some suggestions for teaching reading skills were thus offered to help teachers exploit Discourse Analysis techniques and apply them in their teaching reading 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 English as A Foreign Language (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". 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, in practice, it is observed that EFL learners face significant challenges preventing them from performing their reading tasks successfully and thus leading to failure in understanding what they read. 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 when studying reading comprehension 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 limited knowledge of 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 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, Hashemi and Ghanizadeh (2012) carried out an experimental study to investigate the impact of integrating Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in reading classes. In the context of EFL in Vietnam, Do (2016) investigated how critical thinking helps students decode authors’ ideology and thoughts imparted in their written discourse, which helps them improve their reading proficiency. Truong (2017) carried out a 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 focused 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, CDA, 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 teachers deploy knowledge of DA to teach reading comprehension as well as what problems they may face.

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. Van Dijk (1985, p.2) advocates that “discourse is the study of real language use, by real speakers in real situations”. 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***

Cohesion and Coherence are terms in discourse analysis and text linguistics to describe properties of written texts. While cohesion means the grammatical and lexical relationships between different elements of a text which hold it together, coherence refers to the way a text makes sense to readers and writer through the relevance and accessibility of its configuration of concepts, ideas and theories.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) divide cohesion into two major types of cohesive relation, namely grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion (Table 1).

**Table 1: Types of Cohesion**

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| --- |
| 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*)

Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000, p. 215) define coherence as "the quality that makes a text conform to a consistent worldview based on one's experience and culture or convention". 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. **Research Methodology**

 Regarding participants, 30 teachers who have been teaching Reading comprehension for 6-20 years from University of Foreign Languages, Hue University (HUFL) were asked to complete the questionnaire showing their personal opinions about DA knowledge, correlation between leaners’ DA knowledge and reading performance, teachers' DA application into teaching reading comprehension and their suggestions to promote their students' reading comprehension by using DA. Five of them (coded T1-T5) were then chosen to enter an in-depth interview to gain more insights into their teaching practice with both achievements and challenges of applying DA techniques in the reading classes. To verify teachers’ answers about their application, class observations at their five classes of Reading at HUFL have been recorded.

Apart from the teachers, 100 students including first-year, second-year and third-year students who are English majors 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. Questionnaires are also administered to these students to investigate their perceptions towards teachers’ practice of applying DA techniques into teaching reading at tertiary level, achievements and challenges they have faced and how they thought DA is necessary for their enhancing reading performance as a language skill proficiency.

## Teacher’s practice of applying discourse analysis techniques to teaching Reading comprehension at University of Foreign Languages, Hue University

Discourse Analysis is fairly popular in language teaching all over the world; 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. In this part of the paper, the results of an investigation into teachers’ incorporation of DA techniques into their Reading classes, some achievements and challenges they have faced and some workable suggestions will be presented.

## 4.1. Teacher’s perception of the Discourse Analysis and its role in teaching reading

Questions relating to whether DA plays a vital role in enhancing students’ reading skills have appealed more than 70% of teachers’ agreement in the survey. It can be inferred that the survey participants highly appreciated the importance of applying DA to teaching reading comprehension. Specifically, the different roles of DA in teaching Reading comprehension were separately taken into consideration. Accordingly, most teachers (86,6%) strongly believed that “analyzing the structure of the passage enables students to understand complex lengthy texts better”. Next, more than half of teachers (56,6%) in the survey stated that “using the background knowledge (schema) facilitates students in understanding the main ideas” and “paying attention to the coherence of words, such as repetitions, synonyms and antonyms in English reading helps students to ignore information unrelated the text’s main ideas” (56,6% and 53,3% respectively). Following this, 46,6% teachers in the survey thought that “making sense of each sentence makes students improve their reading speed” and 46,6% agreed that “summarizing the main idea of the passage after English reading is good for students’ information memorization”. Additionally, teachers also mentioned and affirmed the essential roles of vocabulary and grammar in helping students improve their reading skills. From teachers’ perspective, it can be inferred that different techniques of DA create variously significant impacts on enabling students to boost their reading skills from grasping the main ideas, increasing their reading speed to memorizing texts’ information. All these manifested the correlation between DA knowledge and reading performance of language learners, as according to Chang (2017), the correct use of discourse theory can improve students’ reading quality.

## 4.2. The reality of teaching reading comprehension at HUFL

While there was teacher confirmation of the indispensable role of DA in teaching reading as one of the four communication skills of language, the reality of the reading classes at HUFL somewhat revealed non-supporting and non-corresponding results. In an investigation of teachers' frequency of introducing tenets of DA to their students in Reading class, it is overall found out that DA was not introduced regularly by teachers in reading classes. To be more specific, only about 5 % of students responded that their teachers usually provided them with DA knowledge. The rest showed reluctant response on the frequent and immense use of DA techniques by their teachers in reading classes. Similarly, just one-fifth teacher respondents frequently used DA in their teaching reading lessons. This is once more reinforced in the interview results and class observation. To be more specific, all of the five teacher respondents in the interview confirmed that DA was sometimes or seldom employed in their teaching Reading comprehension. They claimed any avoidance of using DA might derive from the fact that DA knowledge seems to be hard for students to follow (T1, T2) or some teachers are so familiar with conventional approaches (T5). Throughout most class observation, it was witnessed that some teachers followed the activities in the textbooks which contained mainly conventional exercises as multiple choices, answering questions, true - false - not given tasks. In those classes, due to time constraint, teachers just gave students time to work in pairs or groups, and then checked the answers. In the revision periods, some teachers tried to make time to guide their students how to read by introducing some DA tenets like skimming, scanning, analyzing texts’ structures, etc.

It can be drawn out from the findings that though realizing the importance and definite correlation of DA and Reading comprehension performance, most of the teachers did not often apply DA to teaching Reading comprehension in their classes due to some objective and subjective reasons.

# 4.3. Teachers’ incorporation of DA into teaching Reading comprehension

As stated previously, one of the major concerns which this research focused on was teachers’ current practice of applying DA to teaching reading comprehension. Therefore, with an aim to describing the whole picture of using DA to teaching Reading comprehension in real reading classes, data from participants’ responses to the questionnaires, the in-depth interviews as well as the class observation were analyzed and cross-checked.

## 4.3.1 Strategies and activities employed by teachers to incorporate DA techniques in reading classes

#### *Chart 1****:*** *Teachers’ frequency of employing DA activities in teaching Reading comprehension*

It is noticeable that when teachers were asked to what degree some DA techniques were actually adopted to teach Reading comprehension, the majority of the surveyed teachers showed their regularity in using them. Ranked as the first in the list of DA activities which were applied the most frequently, *seeking the topic sentence of each paragraph* were chosen by 66,6% teachers. Following this, 60% of teachers often instructed students to identify the purpose of the reading tasks before reading and to identify the organizing pattern/ discourse structure of the text. More importantly, the gap between the frequencies of techniques which were utilized regularly is narrow, meaning that teachers tended to simultaneously apply different DA activities to teaching Reading comprehension. Figuring out topic sentence, identifying the purpose of the reading tasks and organizing pattern are teachers’ preferred and frequent techniques.

The findings from the survey data were totally supported by data from the interviews and class observation. Particularly, all of the five teacher participants confirmed that they usually combined different techniques to teach their students reading skills so that their students could benefit the most from the lessons. Therefore, the teachers hoped that their students could find that learning to read is less challenging and more effective (T1, T3). Furthermore, in their opinions, depending on texts in terms of genre, length, and question types, they would opt for different techniques flexibly (T2, T5). The findings also showed that some certain techniques could be applied to all texts provided; as a result, they appeared frequently in their process of teaching (T3, T2).

## 4.3.2. Teachers’ classroom practices in relation to their perceptions

The research also aims at finding the correlation between teachers’ perceptions and their practice of applying DA to teaching Reading comprehension. When asking students what they thought about their teachers’ application of DA techniques in reading classes, we have the results as follows:

#### *Chart 2: Students’ opinion on their teachers’ frequency of employing DA activities in teaching Reading comprehension*

As can be seen clearly in the chart 2, more than 70% of students in the survey stated that *finding out the topic sentence* and *locating the position of information* were the most popular techniques which their teachers often introduced in their reading classes. Coming next to this, 65% said they were often guided to *pay attention to the structure of sentences* and *summarize the main idea of whole paper* by their teachers*.* What is more, the gaps between the frequencies of employing techniques are not large, which shows that the majority of teachers frequently employed DA techniques actively in their teaching process. This finding is remarkably similar to the result obtained from questionnaires for teachers. Therefore, it can be drawn that there is a close relationship between what teachers perceive and their practice in real reading classes.

Additionally, this finding was reconfirmed by what the researcher observed in the reading classes and some ideas teachers shared in the interview as follows:

*"DA is a quiet complex term in theory but actually, its techniques I sometimes use in my teaching to help students do their reading texts easily." (T3)*

*“To be honest, I cannot remember exactly definitions of DA and discourse-related knowledge because DA is a large field. However, I think DA techniques are practical for my students to apply to their reading process.” (T1, T3)*

*“DA techniques are widely diverse so I often introduce them to my students in reading classes. Thanks to it, my students can try different techniques and find out which ones really work with their reading.” (T2, T5)*

*“It is hard for me and my colleagues to call the name of techniques exactly but we try to apply some in our teaching.” (T4)*

Through the researcher's observation, in most observed lessons, teachers tried to introduce some simple and practical tenets such as locating a position of information, seeking to topic sentence, identifying the text type, etc. to students when they helped students check answers for questions in textbooks. Others often took advantage of revision periods to guide students on how to use DA activities in their reading process. Thanks to teachers' guidance, students found their reading more easily; more particularly, students could quickly seek more correct answers.

In summary, the findings indicate that most of the teachers believe in the significant roles and merits of DA in teaching reading skills. That is the reason why they also take time to introduce DA activities to their students.

**4.3.3. Teachers’ realization of challenges in the employment of DA to teaching Reading comprehension**

Although knowledge of Discourse Analysis can have beneficial impacts on students’ reading comprehension, teachers and students still faced 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* (53.3%). About 50% agreed that *teachers’* *limited strategies of designing and applying Discourse-based tasks*, and *difficulty in forming students' habits of doing 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 (43.3% and 36.6% 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 awareness and a lack of daily practice were also perceived as difficulties which students had to face (approximately 53.3% and 50% respectively).

To sum up, in fact, there are some problems which students have to face including complicated knowledge, lack of metacognitive strategies 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 perceive, so teachers have a tendency to choose useful and simple techniques to save time and make sure students can grasp easily.

**5. Implications and suggestions for improving students’ reading comprehension through an application of Discourse Analysis**

Research results show that though DA knowledge has apparently exerted positive impacts on teaching reading at the tertiary level, it is not a frequent and subconscious process employed by teachers in most reading classrooms at HUFL. Realizing the merits and demerits of the DA approach to teaching reading may help the teachers better their application with a view to helping students improve their reading skills and thus, facilitate their practice for language proficiency. There are some suggestions for DA techniques in the reading classroom, namely *teaching the students how to skim and scan* and *developing the student's linguistic knowledge* were chosen by 73,3% and 63,3% teachers respectively. Furthermore, lower proportions of them showed their interest in the solutions of *exposing learners to large quantities of meaningful and interesting second language (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 investigation on teachers’ practice of using DA in teaching reading has revealed both prospects and contraints in the approach at HUFL. The teachers in the survey claim that Discourse-based is a pre-eminent 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 faced 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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