From Rules to Meaning Making: Teaching Grammar through Discourse Analysis as an Approach

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Abstract

This paper argues for a shift in English grammar teaching, advocating for discourse analysis as an approach to viewing grammar as a meaning-making instrument in context. Moving beyond isolated sentences and rote memorization, this paper explores grammatical cohesion and textuality, emphasizing how connections between words (references, ellipsis, substitution) and sentence structure (conjunctions, theme-rheme) contribute to the flow and coherence of a text. Several practical teaching activities are then proposed, encouraging students to analyze real-world texts and discover how grammatical choices impact textual meaning. These activities aim to transform students from grammar memorizers to meaning-makers, fostering a deeper understanding of how language functions in real-world communication. By integrating discourse analysis as an approach, this paper equips teachers to create engaging learning experiences that develop students' appreciation of the dynamic nature of language and empower them to craft clear and cohesive spoken and written texts.

1   Introduction

Spoken and written discourses display an intricate weaving of words, phrases, and sentences. The connections between these elements comprise grammatical cohesion and textuality. The eye of a simple reader or listener may not decipher the entangled connections between these elements. However, for a discourse analyst, this can be as fascinating as critically examining how a fabric or a piece of clothing has been made. Given this context, this discussion explores how grammatical links improve or make up grammatical cohesion and textuality. At the same time, the discussion considers how discourse analysts assert *contextualized uses of grammatical items.* Furthermore, it explains how discourse analysis can affect the teaching of English grammar. Finally, practical suggestions for teaching the core concepts of grammatical cohesion and textuality are provided.

Several scholars in the field of contextualized uses of grammatical items have stressed that this instruction can productively enhance the memory of learners for target grammar and syntax structures (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Liamkina & Ryshina-Pankova, 2012; Yang, 2020). However, before exploring this assumption, it is essential to first understand the grammar links (McCarthy, 1991) that connect spoken and written expressions.

This paper, therefore, bridges the gap between traditional grammar instruction and the application of discourse analysis in English language teaching. By exploring core concepts such as references (anaphoric, cataphoric, exophoric), substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and theme-rheme structures, this paper aims to demonstrate how these elements contribute to coherence and meaning-making in texts. Additionally, it seeks to provide practical teaching strategies that leverage real-world texts, thereby enabling teachers to create more engaging and contextually relevant grammar lessons. Ultimately, the goal is to transform students from passive recipients of grammatical rules into active participants in the construction of meaning, which can potentially enhance their understanding and appreciation of language as a dynamic and functional tool.

2   Concepts of Grammatical Cohesion and Textuality

2.1   References

Reference pertains to the connection between words, phrases, or ideas in a text or speech. It is

categorized into three broad types: anaphoric, cataphoric, and exophoric. They are linguistic techniques used to indicate or allude to something that has been previously stated, will be discussed hereafter, or exists outside of the text, respectively.

2.1.2 Anaphoric: Looking Back

First, anaphoric reference connects backward, tying subsequent information to earlier information. The most common referents are pronouns (e.g., I, you, he, she, they, them, it) and demonstratives (this, that, these, and those). They often play this role by reminding listeners or readers of previously introduced entities. For example, *The cat sat on the windowsill. It looked very comfortable in the warm sunlight.* In this example, *It* is an anaphoric reference that refers to the noun phrase *The cat* in the previous sentence. However, teachers must be aware of the persistent challenges in pronoun and reference usage across languages (McCarthy, 1991). The Filipino language, for example, has no equivalent pronouns for *he* and *she.* According to McCarthy (1991), what discourse analysts can offer to help solve these recurring problems is limited; they can only explicitly teach learners a language system like English.

2.1.2 Cataphoric: Looking Forward

The second type of reference is *cataphoric reference*. This type of reference captures the reader's interest by referring to later discourse items (McCarthy, 1991). Thus, meaning or reference unfolds as a sentence or text progresses. Clearly, this is contradictory to anaphoric reference, which refers to something previously mentioned. Despite its unique feature of establishing interest among readers, there is a risk of overuse or unnatural use. Training learners to observe language features beyond the sentence level is crucial, particularly in English, where referencing involves elements that are not easily translated into other languages (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; McCarthy, 1991). Here are some examples of this reference: *in anticipation of details* (*He* had developed a habit to save energy. *Before leaving the house, Mark makes sure all the electronics are plugged out or lights are turned off.*); *introducing a term before explaining it*: (*The new software has several advanced features. These* include a sophisticated user interface and enhanced security measures.); and establishing a connection with a later concept (*Although she felt uneasy, Mary continued the hike. That* determination ultimately helped her reach the summit.).

2.1.3 Exophoric: Something Outside

Another form of reference is *exophoric reference*. It reaches outside the text, anchoring meaning in a nonlinguistic context. Deictics (e.g., here, now) or demonstratives (this or that) rely on shared knowledge of the physical or social environment to establish grounding. For example, *Please pass me "that"* (rice) relies on the speaker and listener's shared understanding of their physical location. In the given example, there is a dining table and nothing but rice to pass on to the speaker. Exophoric references frequently pertain to a common understanding between the sender and receiver of a message, irrespective of cultural differences. However, these references can also be culturally specific, extending beyond experience and tapping into the cultural knowledge of the receiver of a message (Cutting, 2021; Fulcher, 1989; McCarthy, 1991). For example, a foreign student who comes across the Philippine English word *Barangay* in a Philippine newspaper will need to tap external sources (e.g., asking a friend) to understand the text. McCarthy (1991) called this cultural exophoric reference.

2.2 Ellipsis and Substitution

Other concepts that contribute to grammatical cohesion and textuality are *ellipsis* and *substitution. Ellipsis* refers to the omission of elements based on the assumed context, while *substitution* is the replacement of one element with another. The distinction between these two aspects is crucial for effective language usage. The following examples illustrate this distinction:

2.2.1 Ellipsis

In English, *ellipsis*, like *substitution,* includes three main types: nominal, verbal, and clausal. *Nominal ellipsis* frequently entails the omission of a noun headword.

Example: Sanja likes the modern design. Si Eun likes the traditional.

According to McCarthy, nominal ellipsis should not be challenging for speakers of the Romance and Germanic languages. *Verbal*

ellipsis, however, may cause more difficulties. Thomas (1987) identified two types of verbal ellipsis (echoing and contrasting).

Verbal Ellipsis: *Contrasting*
      A: Will you attend the meeting?
      B: I might, I can't say for sure.
Verbal Ellipsis: Echoing
      A. Will you be at the café?
      B. I will be there.

Thomas (1987) also points out that verbal ellipsis can be possible in the same verbal group.

Original:
      A: Did you complete the assignment?
      B: I did complete it. I did it thoroughly. I did it on time.
Verbal Ellipsis:
      A: Did you complete the assignment?
      B: I did. Thoroughly. On time.
Clausal Ellipsis - Subject Pronoun Omission:
      A: How are you?
      B: Fine. (*I am* being omitted)
      or "Do you like the steak I cooked for you?" Riski asked Nga excitedly. "Absolutely," said Nga. The adverb *absolutely* is an ellipsis replacing the entire clause *I absolutely like the steak.*

2.2.2 Substitution

Substitution in grammar is the replacement of one word or phrase with another to avoid repetition or add variety to the expression. For example, it refers to the act of replacing a word or phrase with a filler word, such as *one, do*, *so/not, or same* to avoid redundancy (McCarthy, 1991; Nordquist, 2020). Below is an illustration of how *substitution* is normally used in English:

      Example 1: They brought sandwiches. They gave me one.
      Example 2: Did you read the book? I think Ilee read it.
      Example 3: Do you have plans for the weekend? If so, let me know; if not, we can make plans together.
      Example 4: We ordered pizza, and they ordered the same.

The examples provided above to supplement the discussion on ellipsis and substitution mostly reflect everyday conversations. This is because *ellipsis* and *substitution* are not common in academic or technical writing but are found more frequently in spoken discourse (MacCarthy, 1991). This is because of the assumption that the missing or replaced items can be easily determined. This works well in conversational discourse, where context is abundant and helps to understand what is said.

2.3 Conjunction

A *conjunction* does not initiate a search either forward or backward like *cataphoric* and *anaphoric*, respectively, for its referent, but it does assume a sequential order in the text and indicates a connection between different parts of the discourse. Hence, discourse analysts consider conjunctions in a manner similar to that of grammatical links discussed above. They investigate the functions of conjunctions in constructing discourse, examine whether their categories and manifestations vary across languages, analyze their distribution in spoken and written language, explore usage restrictions that are not evident through sentence analysis alone, and identify aspects of their use that are not sufficiently explained in traditional grammar. To investigate it as a contributory element to building grammatical cohesion and textuality, Halliday (1985) provided classifications for conjunctive relations, encompassing phrasal and single-word conjunctions such as the common *and*, *but*, and *or*. The list was organized into three categories: *elaboration, extension*, and *enhancement*. Moreover, Halliday and Hasan (1976) enumerated the following simplified versions: *additive* (e.g., and, furthermore, as well as)*, adversative* (e.g., but, however, although)*, causal* (e.g., so, because, consequently)*, and temporal* (e.g., while, as soon as, meanwhile)*.

Additive Conjunction:
I enjoy cooking food for my family, and I also like treating them outside.
Adversative Conjunction:
Mark loves playing soccer, but her brother prefers basketball.
Causal Conjunction:
The road was wet because it had snowed heavily the night before.
Temporal Conjunction:
After finishing her homework, Maya went out to watch a movie in the cinema.

While the examples above indicate how conjunctions are used, McCarthy (1991) stressed

that in natural spoken language, common conjunctions such as *and, but, so*, and *then* not only connect individual statements but also serve as *discourse markers*, organizing extended stretches of discourse. Furthermore, according to discourse analysts, cultural differences may influence the use of conjunctions (Gee, 2004; Schiffrin, 2005). For example, Firth (1988) observed that non-native speakers predominantly use *because* for reasons, while native speakers use varied signals, such as *cos*, *like*, and *see* based on spoken data about smoking in public. Understanding spoken data is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of discourse patterns (Leech, 2000; Taylor, 2013; Walsh, 2006).

2.4 Theme and Rheme

In language learning, learners often focus on clause structures, including the arrangement of subjects, objects, and adverbials around verbs. Discourse analysts explore the implications of these structural options for text creation, emphasizing the emergence of patterns from natural data. Some structural options, particularly those found in spoken language, are overlooked in language teaching because of a bias towards written standards (Carter & McCarthy, 1995; McCarthy, 1991).

In English, Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) commonly exhibits various ways of rearranging clause elements using fronting devices. Different fronting options, such as adverbial fronting, cleft, and pseudo-cleft structures, allow speakers to highlight specific elements and shape a message's focus.

Adverbial-fronting:
Original: Carlo will go to the party.
Adverbial-fronting: To the party, Carlo will go.
In this case, the adverbial *to the party* is placed in front to emphasize the destination of the action.
Cleft Structure:
Original: She cooked the meal for our lunch.
Cleft Structure: It was she who cooked the meal for our lunch.
The cleft structure emphasizes *she*, making it the highlighted element in the sentence.

Pseudo-cleft Structure:
Original: The team finished the project on time.
Pseudo-cleft Structure: What the team did was finish the project on time.

Here, the pseudo-cleft structure emphasizes the action, *finish the project on time*, as the key information. These examples demonstrate how different fronting options can be used to highlight specific elements in a sentence and shape the message's focus. Hence, the concept of *theme*, representing the first elements in a clause, is crucial for understanding the framework within which the message is conveyed. This notion aligns with the Prague School's view of communicative dynamism and is seen as the "point of departure" for the message (McCarthy, 1991). The importance of the first position in the clause and the creation of a universal theme in language are highlighted. On the other hand, *rheme* or the rest of the clause provides additional details and information regarding the *theme*. The following are some examples of the connection between the two:

Example 1: The sun sets over the horizon.
In this sentence, *The sun* is the theme and subject of the clause, while the rheme contains the action and additional information.
Example 2: After a long day at work, she finally relaxed.
Here, the theme introduces the temporal context, and the rheme presents the main action.
Example 3: In the enchanted forest, magical creatures come to life.
The theme establishes the setting, and the rheme describes the action taking place.

Discourse analysts have emphasized the role of thematization in shaping communication dynamics and audience orientation (Chimombo & Roseberry, 2013; Hyland, 2015). Thematization involves making strategic decisions to organize information, determining what to foreground and how to present it within a discourse framework. Regarding discourse analysis aimed at impacting language instruction, McCarthy (1991) suggested that exploring variations in clause structure concerning discourse functions could be a valuable starting point. McCarthy also revealed that deviations from the standard SVO order are more common in natural talk. Other languages also exhibit diverse approaches to thematization. For example, Japanese uses the particle *wa* and Tagalog uses *ang* or *ay* at the end of the clause for topicalization (Greider, 1979; Hinds, 1986). Consequently, learners from different backgrounds may encounter challenges at different proficiency levels, reflecting the issues in conventional grammar teaching.

Therefore, the following sections demonstrate

how discourse analysis can influence ways of teaching English grammar through *contextualized uses of grammatical items* as explained above. Further examples are provided as practical guides for teaching English grammar regarding grammatical cohesion and textuality.

3 Influences of Discourse Analysis for Teaching English Grammar

Discourse analysis has only recently started influencing the way English grammar is taught to "non-native" English speakers (Celce-Murcia, 1990). In particular, a significant number of English language teachers continue to view and teach grammar primarily at the sentence level, if they incorporate it into their teaching at all (Cook, 1999; Hos & Kekec, 2014). For decades, English grammar instruction has been characterized by rote memorization of rules and drills on isolated sentences (Gartland & Smolkin, 2015). While such drills have their place, they offer a limited perspective on how language truly functions. Conversely, other discourse analysts have indicated that discourse analysis has significantly contributed to the teaching of English grammar by highlighting the importance of analyzing real data (McCarthy, 1991; Rymes, 2015). This brief background on discourse analysis reflects how I previously viewed teaching grammar and how I currently perceive teaching using discourse analysis as a transformative tool.

Discourse analysis, remarkably, provides a crucial lens through which we can view grammar not as a set of rigid rules but as a dynamic tool for building meaning and purpose within specific contexts. By incorporating relevant insights, I believe that discourse analysis will influence my perception of English grammar teaching in the future for a more meaningful and relevant experience for students. One of the primary strengths of discourse analysis lies in its ability to move beyond the confines of an isolated sentence (Georgakopoulou, 2019). Now that I have realized this concept of teaching through the lens of discourse analysis, instead of focusing on deconstructing individual grammatical structures, I could apply discourse analysis for students to examine how structures work together to create textuality. Baxter (2010) and Kaplan and Grabe (2002) supported this view of teaching and stated that this approach could better help learners create cohesive and coherent texts. This shift in perspective is crucial for students, as it allows them to see how grammar contributes to the flow of information, the development of ideas, and the overall impact of a text.

Reflecting on the application of discourse analysis in teaching, I was not aware previously that it could be helpful for me and my students to incorporate such an approach. For instance, I utilized several texts to teach grammar; however, I was not fully aware of or knowledgeable about the power of discourse analysis to transform grammar teaching. Given that I am somewhat learning about its transformative potential, I believe that it is crucial to incorporate practical ways to introduce this concept by leveraging available resources. This can be done, for instance, by analyzing or using real-world texts (e.g., news articles, poems, songs, excerpts from literary pieces, or even social media posts, lyrics, or captions from movies and series) for teaching.

Examining how writers employ references, ellipsis and substitution, conjunction, and theme-rheme structures can reveal the intricate ways in which grammatical choices contribute to textual coherence. For instance, tracing the connections established through anaphoric pronouns can shed light on the underlying structure of a complex argument, whereas analyzing the placement of new information (rheme) can demonstrate how writers build suspense or emphasize key points. Furthermore, discourse analysis encourages us to move beyond a purely technical understanding of grammar and towards considering its functional uses (Gee, 2017). By examining how different grammatical links convey specific meanings and achieve communicative goals in different contexts, students can gain deeper appreciation of the dynamic and subtle nature of language. They begin to understand that the "correctness" of a grammatical choice is not merely a matter of following rules, but rather a question of effectiveness in achieving a particular communicative purpose, which Newman (1996) called *sociolinguistic sense*.

Therefore, by weaving these threads of discourse analysis into the fabric of grammar teaching, teachers can move beyond rote memorization and boring exercises. Teachers can create a learning space where students become not just grammarians but also tailors of meaning-making. Through this, I can help students learn how grammatical choices are not isolated decisions, but threads sewed on a larger fabric, contributing to the coherence, flow, and purpose of a text. Thus, students begin to understand how language, through its intricate grammar, reflects

and shapes the world around us.

4 Suggestions for Teaching Practice

Formerly, as a student, I hated attending grammar classes based on traditional grammar instruction, with its focus on isolated sentences and rule-based drills, which often left me struggling with the disconnect between textbook examples and the use of language in the real world. However, as a teacher unraveling and exploring the world of discourse analysis, I find the possibility of bridging this gap by transforming the boring fabric of grammar into a tapestry of meaning and context exciting. Through the following suggestions for teaching practices, teachers can realize an English grammar classroom where students become not just grammarians but also tailors of meaning-making.

4.1 References

Anaphoric Adventures: Through this activity, students can be engaged in detective work as they follow "pronoun chain" in texts such as news articles, short stories, or even their favorite *Korean dramas* or *K-dramas* using subtitles. By discerning how *she* relates to a previously mentioned character or how *it* ties to a complex political event in a news article, students investigate how references ground ideas and foster thematic coherence.

Cataphoric Clues: Integrating this activity into teaching cataphoric reference, teachers must first conceal a mysterious object in the classroom and introduce it with a cataphoric pronoun such as *it* or a demonstrative *that*. Subsequently, students are asked to compose instructions using cataphoric references, fostering suspense and building clarity before the object is revealed.

Exophoric Review: This involves exploring shared cultural references in jokes or memes during class discussions. There are a variety of memes on various social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and X, formerly Twitter) to obtain sample texts. Students analyze how these references draw on external knowledge to generate humor, underscoring the role of exophoric reference in connecting language to the real world.

4.2. Ellipsis and Substitution

Ellipsis Song Analysis: Teachers can play songs, such as Bruno Mars' *Just the Way You Are*, where ellipsis is used for emphasis. For example, students can be asked to complete the following ellipted lyrics (from the above song): *And when you smile....* The class discusses how the missing words heighten the emotional impact, and students are invited to fill in the missing lyrics.

Substitution Script Switch-up: Select a scene from a film or TV show and encourage students to rephrase or continue the dialog on their own by incorporating substitution. Teachers can also provide rich examples of text from popular TV shows or series to supplement their learning. Thus, through this exercise, students' comprehension can be aided by understanding how substitution affects the tone and significance of dialogs.

4.3 Conjunction

Transition Time Machine: Through this activity, students can analyze different conjunctive adverbs such as *however* or *moreover* in historical speeches of, for example, local politicians or persuasive essays of known advertising companies locally. The teacher discusses how these transitions signal shifts in argument or emphasis, guiding the reader through the text's organization.

The Clash: In teaching cause and effect conjunctions, students may write paragraphs exploring topics relevant to their interests or topics discussed by the teacher. The aim is for students to consciously employ specific conjunctive phrases such as *therefore*, *as a result*, *contrastingly*, etc. to build logical organization and enhance coherence.

Debate it: In this activity, the teacher divides the students into opposing sides of a debate topic and instructs them to use specific conjunctive adverbs to counter arguments and construct their own persuasive reasoning. This activity emphasizes the dynamic role of conjunctions in argumentative discourse.

4.4 Theme and Rheme

Headlines and Hooks: Teachers may challenge students to rewrite headlines using the theme-

rheme structure, placing the newsworthy element (rheme) at the end to capture the readers' interest. This activity reinforces the power of effective build-up of information.

Suspenseful Stories: This activity may help develop students' creative skills. To do this, the teacher must choose a story and divide it into segments, giving each student only the theme (starting point) of their segment. They then write their part, building suspense by delaying the rheme (new information) until the next segment. This exercise shows how theme-rheme structures create anticipation and enhance narrative flow.

Rheme Relay Race: The teacher divides students into teams and provides them with a sequence of unrelated words. Each team then writes a sentence using these words, placing the most important information (rheme) at the end. This activity emphasizes the strategic organization of information, applying rhemes to achieve cohesion and textuality.

There are probably a lot more practical teaching practices that can be applied in English grammar classes. They are not limited to the suggestions provided. However, when teachers start to adopt discourse analysis as a transformative tool in English grammar instruction, it will revolutionize their approach to engaging students in meaningful language-learning experiences.

5   Conclusion

This discussion emphasizes the influence of discourse analysis on English grammar teaching. By moving beyond isolated sentences and rote memorization, discourse analysis offers a lens through which grammar can be viewed as a dynamic tool for building meaning and purpose in specific contexts. Furthermore, this paper highlights the importance of grammatical cohesion and textuality, emphasizing how discourse analysts explore the dynamic connections between words, phrases, and sentences. Specifically, various types of references (e.g., anaphoric, cataphoric, and exophoric), ellipsis, substitution, and theme and rheme are illustrated, showing how these grammatical links contribute to grammatical cohesion and textuality.

Notably, practical teaching suggestions are provided, encouraging teachers to engage students in activities using contextualized uses of grammatical items that aim to foster a deeper understanding of how grammatical choices contribute to textual coherence.

Therefore, discourse analysis advocates a paradigm shift in language instruction. Such an approach can

provide teachers with a lens through which to integrate discourse analysis into their teaching practices. By doing so, students can develop a holistic appreciation for language, understand how grammatical choices contribute to the overall impact and effectiveness of spoken and written texts, and become tailors of meaning-making rather than purely grammar critics.

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