【Research Brief 】

Maintaining Discourse Competence in a Synchronous Online Discussion Board Activity

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Abstract

Moving to an online environment as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic necessitated a careful consideration about how the aims of a language course could be maintained despite the disruption to regular classes. This paper outlines how a synchronous online discussion board activity was used to maintain and develop the discourse competence of English language students at a university in Tokyo. It offers a three-point definition of discourse, explains why discourse competence is crucial to the development of a second language learner's ability, and analyzes an extract from an online discussion to find evidence of whether students were able to demonstrate a sound understanding of discourse. Finally, there is a brief description of how students perceived the activity and a conclusion that points to potential areas of further study.

Keywords: *Discourse, Discourse Competence, Discussion board, Synchronous,*

Discussion

Developing a strong understanding of how language is used in context is essential for becoming proficient in a second language. Almost everything we say is intended for a receiver, so when we speak, we are conveying messages that serve a purpose connected to the context in which the utterance is made. This elaboration of language use is one way to define the concept of *discourse,* though it does in fact carry a wide range of meanings related to a large number of academic fields. Thornbury was right to point out that the concept is "slippery" as it eludes neat definition and embraces a wide range of linguistic and social phenomena (Thornbury, 2010). Here, *discourse* will be understood in three key ways: as connected language, as language in use, and as language as a social practice. Each one of these concepts will be used to consider student language use and to assess more generally what can be considered their *discourse competence.* Discourse competence should be a familiar area of research in second language learning as it is part of a suite of competences that combine to make up a second language learner's overall *communicative competence.* Communicative competence, developed by Hymes (1972) and elaborated by others (Canale, 1983; Celce-Mucia, 2007) describes a person's knowledge of when something is not only formally possible in a language but when it is also feasible, appropriate, and done in specific speech communities (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Language *use* is made up of so much more than grammatical rules, and it follows conventions and patterns that are essential to understanding actual instances of language used in specific situations and contexts. According to Hymes "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless (1972), and this position has been taken up in the field of second language learning and acquisition ever since. Communicative competence and its pedagogical corollary Communicative Language Teaching are central tenets in most modern teaching philosophies. In addition, it has been argued (Celce-Mucia, 2007) that discourse is itself central to any understanding of communicative competence, and this centrality makes it all the more important when considering what should be taught in second language classes and the methods used therein.

When we consider discourse as a series of connected utterances, we rely on the concepts of textual coherence and cohesive devices. Halliday and Hasan (1976) suggested that spoken and written passages that connected to form a unified whole should be considered a text – a unit of language above the level of the sentence. They analyzed how one utterance in a discussion, for example, connected to previous and subsequent utterances to create a unified and connected unit. There are a number of formal elements that make it possible for sentences to connect and form a complete text. These include lexical and grammatical similarities and repetition, reference expressions that create chains of reference throughout a text, as well as conjunctions that explicitly draw attention to the type of relationship between two statements. These formal elements allow for the interpretation of certain elements that are dependent on other elements for their meaning (Flowerdew, 2013). In addition to such formal elements, connections can be created when each participant in a discussion makes utterances that are contextually suitable and appropriate. This principle of cooperation was first expounded by Grice (1975) and helps us to understand how language use is so often coherent in terms of manner, relevance, quality, and quantity. Helping a second language learner to develop this understanding of language use is essential if they are to become adept at using the language in a variety of situations. Moreover, they will need to understand that there is more to producing and understanding language than producing and receiving a series of grammatically correct sentences.

Discourse also relates to the way speakers use a language, the purpose, intention, and function of the utterances that they make. This approach to understanding discourse, and language generally, was made popular by theorists like J.L. Austin (1962) and John Searle (1969). They recognized that there are discernible functions below the formal layer of language that enact and achieve pragmatic goals. People *do* things with language – they invite and offer, negotiate and assess, clarify and agree, among many other things – and expect the receiver to respond accordingly and appropriately. Invitations, for example, call for either an acceptance or a refusal and thus limit the amount of possible or preferable responses that can be made. Speech acts and their possible pairs help us understand how utterances can cohere even when there is an absence of formal markers. Formal links are not always necessary if people are able to identify the underlying purpose and function of an utterance and respond accordingly in terms of the context in which the utterance is made (Cook, 1989). When form diverges from function, however, or when speakers use indirect speech, second language learners can experience difficulties, as they may not be as adept at determining the function of an utterance without explicit formal clues (Cook, 1989). It therefore becomes important to develop their understanding of language and raise their awareness in terms of its pragmatic nature and possibilities. Focusing on functional language items in the classroom and giving students an opportunity to use and understand them therefore becomes a profitable experience. Discourse is mutually constructed and negotiated by its participants, and second language learners will not be able to participate equally without a certain level of discourse competence.

The third form of discourse is concerned with language as social practice, as Thornbury (2010) described it, and suggests that social practices are encoded in language. Gee (1999) has further expounded this understanding of discourse by suggesting that the function of language is to scaffold the performance of social activities and a person's affiliation within cultures and social groups. For second language learners, this involves expressing their identity and a sense of belonging through their use of the second language, as well as the ability to identify and respond to the cultural norms

of the language community into which they have entered. Discourse can reflect an array of different identities clustered around concepts like gender, age, and class, to name but a few, and how society has constructed the relationships between these different groups of people (O'Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, & Fiske, 1983). Language use therefore does more than perform certain acts like invitations and suggestions. It enacts a person's identity and their willingness – or lack thereof - to belong to certain groups and communities. Furthermore, the unit of meaning most commonly associated with discourse, the text, is intertextual as it is related to and reflects the nature of other examples of the same genre of communication. Usually, these are shaped by specific rules and standards that can be culturally specific. A student's use of language can therefore reflect their acceptance of and conformity to dominant social rules and norms. This is an area that can sometimes cause problems for second language learners as they may lack the culturally specific background knowledge needed to use language and discourse appropriately (Flowerdew, 2013). This can be nurtured in the classroom, however, with appropriate instruction and practice, and along with the other aspects of discourse competence, should be an important teaching goal in any language course.

Context

All first-year students at Rikkyo University are required to complete a set of compulsory English classes, including one that is focused on English Discussion. In these discussion classes students are introduced to a variety of contemporary topics and a suite of discussion and communication skills that facilitate their ability to talk about these topics. As the classes are small, comprising of around ten students, there is ample opportunity for each student to learn, practice, and use the skills and improve their discourse competence. The course emphasis the importance of co-constructing the discussion, which means they must be sensitive to how their utterances connect to those of the other students to form a unified text. They develop an understanding of language in use as the items introduced each week are constantly related to the function that they perform. Finally, as each class comprises freshman students, many of whom have never met each other before class, the students find themselves in a position to engage in a variety of social practices: they can establish relationships, enact values of good discursive behavior, and express not only their ideas, but a sense of their identity. The course is especially valuable to Japanese speakers of English who often begin the course lacking not only in discourse competence but communicative competence more generally. Despite the general move towards a more communicative approach to language learning and teaching, many Japanese students have continued to experience being taught English at the level of the sentence and have focused on grammatical competence as well as reading and writing ability as a measure of their overall linguistic proficiency (Kikuchi, 2006). It is therefore a valuable experience that fosters the students' ability to become more complete language learners with a better understanding of what language is and how it is used.

At least, this was the case until a decision was made to move all discussion classes online as a consequence of the Coronavirus pandemic starting in 2020. It therefore became important to think about how students at Rikkyo could continue to gain exposure to this valuable language input while studying from home. It was decided that classes would be conducted at least partially via Zoom, and that in doing so, students would still be given a considerable opportunity to engage in the kind of speaking activities that promoted their discourse competence - albeit on a screen rather than face to face. However, part of the lesson was to be conducted using online resources other than Zoom, and

this led to the activity discussed in this paper. The following is an explication of an activity that was developed on the discussion board feature of Blackboard. It is important to note that this was the third iteration of the activity, as previous versions of the activity had been less successful in developing the students discourse competence. Furthermore, it should also be noted that the activity represented here focuses on the experience of students in the Level I and Level II cohort at Rikkyo. It is beyond the purview of this research brief to elaborate the problems encountered in earlier versions of the activity and the experience of students less proficient than the ones mentioned here.

Online Discussion Board Activity

The discussion board activity attempted to replicate the actual in-class discussion activity in an online environment. Obviously, this presented a number of challenges: the participants were communicating via a computer rather than communicating face to face, and there is an obvious difference in typing and writing messages instead of speaking. Nevertheless, it was thought that they could discuss topics in real time with each other via the discussion board. Each group did the activity either before or after their 40-minute Zoom lesson, so it either acted as a preparation for the Zoom class or as a post-lesson extension. In terms of preparation, the students were given ten minutes to think about a topic question on their own and complete a pre-discussion activity in the textbook. They were then told to enter a group thread and discuss the topic together for about thirty minutes. The target language and the topic were the same in both parts of the lesson. Each group consisted of two or three students, as this gave each student a greater opportunity to co-create the discussion by increasing the number of interactions they were able to make. Furthermore, it enabled them to use the lesson's discussion skills more often and thus promote their acquisition of some useful functional language. The overall aim of the activity was to promote their discourse competence. The following is a typical exchange between three members of a Level 1 class.

Excerpt from Discussion Board: Week 10 University students and social media

How does social media affect these areas of a student's life?
Social life and hobbies
Studying
Family life and relaxing

1. A. How do you guys think social media affect our social life?
2.   B. I think by using social media, we can connect with people who have same hobbies.
3.   A. That is true. It is easy to look for people who have the same hobbies by using social media, such as Instagram.
4.   C. Right. Thanks to social media, we can share our ideas and what we like more easily, and then we can make friends all over the world!
5.   C. Social media has allowed us to do anything online, like we can take classes through ZOOM and we can buy outfits online. What do you think?
6.   B. That is true! Without social media, stude can't take classes in this situation, so it is necessary for their lives.
7.   A. I totally agree with you. As you said, from the perspective of people who buy clothes online can be more usuful for those who do not like face to face communication.

8. B. How about the affection to studies?

9.　　　C. Some students (including me) sometimes distracted by social media. When using it effectively, social media works well.

10**.**　　　　B. I agree with you. Social media annoys me when I'm studying, like the notifications from line or Instagram.

11.　　　　A. I totally agree with you. As you said, notification distract students whatever situation, and they feel stressed about it but they cannot avoid it because they want to connected with other people.

Analysis

The students in this activity have clearly been able to co-create a good discussion in which they respond to the topic question. Student A begins the discussion by first selecting a speaking point (social media's influence on social lives) and inviting the others to respond. Her use of *'guys'* as a salutation suggests that the other students are fairly well known to her, and her word choice operates phatically in terms of establishing the social group. This is an excellent representation of discourse as social practice in which identities and communities are brought about through language use. Student B takes the following turn with her response, and it is cohesive in two ways: she connects formally to the theme by repeating the lexical item 'social media' and also offers an appropriate response to the question. She has recognized that the function of the opening question is asking for an opinion and responds accordingly by opening her contribution with "*I think…*". Her use of the term "we" also reinforces the fact that these students share a common experience and belong to the same social group. Student C also responds to the question and her opening "*Right*" serves both to indicate agreement with the previous statement as well as to pre-empt a discursive turn, which she then proceeds to complete. This opening sequence establishes a good discursive base from which the discussion can proceed, and even a short sequence like this suggests that these students have a fairly high level of discourse competence.

In Line 5, however, we can see that Student C had previously responded to the question in Line 1, but her response had not been noticed at the time by the other participants. It was an issue with the medium of communication though and not one that reflects poorly on the students. In fact, Student B eventually takes up this new line of discussion. Her emphatic response "*That is true!*" even acts to reassure Student C, whose question had gone unanswered by the group, that this was not an instance of conversational implicature of the type articulated by Grice (1975) and that her question is one that Student B wants to discuss. It revolves around their shared experience of using Zoom and taking classes online because of the pandemic, and once again it hints at the fact that these students share an experience and belong to the same community. Student A also responds to Students C's question and connects to it lexically by repeating the term "*online*" and adds to the theme by comparing it to "*face to face communication*". Face-to-face communication would be a familiar topic to all these students as it is something they had discussed in two previous lessons. Drawing on their shared knowledge, even implicitly, once again marks this discussion as being held by people with a shared experience: students enrolled in a discussion class who communicate with each other online.

In terms of the target language that these students had been addressing in their discussion course, there is evidence that this activity is giving them a good opportunity to repeatedly use a

variety of functional items. In Line 7, Student A has combined a number of these into a single utterance. "*I totally agree with you*" is a phrase she practiced in the second lesson of the course. "*As you said…*" comes from the sixth lesson in which students were encouraged to clearly mark agreement by repeating what a previous speaker had said. Finally, by saying "*from the perspective of people who buy clothes online*", she is using a phrase from the previous lesson in which students considered a variety of different points of view. She repeats most of this pattern in Line 11, which suggests a level of comfort in using these discursive structures in her output. There are enough examples in this excerpt to suggest that the activity was successful in providing students with the opportunity to practice these functional items and to develop their discourse competence. Though brief, this analysis demonstrates that these students have a high degree of discourse competence in each of the three areas outlined previously and that the activity has provided them with an opportunity to develop it further.

Student Survey

To learn whether these students found the activity useful, they were asked to complete a survey (Appendix). Participants (n=41) were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with four statements regarding the activity and to respond to two open questions. For the first four questions they indicated their responses on a five-point Likert scale in which 5 represents strongly agree and 1 represents strongly disagree. Question one asked whether the activity was enjoyable, and students responded favorably with 91.9% indicating that they either strongly agreed or agreed. Enjoyment may not necessarily indicate an activity's usefulness, but it helps students stay motivated if they have a positive attitude toward it. The following two questions asked students directly whether the activity was useful and whether it helped them to use the discussion skills. Again, there was a strong endorsement of the activity's efficacy with 87.4% reporting their strong agreement or agreement for Question 2 and 76.8% reporting the same for Question 3. As this was the main aim of the activity, it was important to receive a positive response. The fourth question focused on the communication skills they had learned, and 67.9% said that the activity had helped them. For Questions 5 and 6 in which students typed their responses to open questions about the advantages and disadvantages of using the discussion board, a number of answers appeared numerous times. The most common criticism was about the need to refresh the page in order to see any new responses and the time lag between responses. The discussion board on Blackboard does not operate as smoothly as other familiar chat applications, and students seemed to have felt this keenly. In terms of advantages, one commonly reported answer was the ability to think more clearly about how to articulate themselves. Again, this indicates how the discussion board activity is not as free flowing as a face-to-face discussion. Overall, the results were very positive and suggest that the students felt it was a good use of their class time.

Conclusion

This research brief has outlined three key features of discourse competence and reviewed how that understanding was applied in the development of an online discussion board activity. The activity was generally successful in helping students in the Level I and Level II cohort at Rikkyo University to develop and consolidate their discourse competence. They could connect to each other's utterances, they demonstrated an understanding of the functional intention of language items, and

were able to establish and maintain their discursive community. It would be rewarding to follow up this initial investigation with a few other lines of inquiry. Specifically, it would be interesting to note how lower-level students were able to manage this activity and to consider how it could be targeted to their needs. It would also be worth investigating any shortcomings in the activity, such as the reported technical concerns regarding Blackboard's discussion board feature, and consider ways in which the students' experience could be improved. Finally, it would also be of interest to note how the language used on the discussion board differed from the language used in the classroom. Spoken and written discourses have their own characteristics, and this could be compared in a future study.

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Appendix – Student Survey

I would like to learn more about how you feel about using the discussion board for your classes. Your answers are completely anonymous, so please feel free to be honest. Thank you very much for your participation.

Strongly agree	非常にそう思う
Agree	そう思う
Neutral	どちらでもない
Disagree	そう思わない
Strongly disagree	全くそう思わない

1. I think using the Discussion Board for classes is enjoyable. 私はディスカッションボードを授業で使うのは楽しいと思います

    Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

2. I think using the Discussion Board for classes is useful. 私はディスカッションボードを授業で使うのは役に立つと思います。

    Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

3. I think using the discussion board helped me use the discussion skills. ディスカッションボードはディスカッションスキルを使うのに役立った。

    Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

4. I think using the discussion board helped me use the communication skills. ディスカッションボードはコミュニケーションスキルを使うのに役立った。

    Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

5. What are the disadvantages of using the Discussion Board?
ディスカッションボードの不利／不便な点は何ですか？

6. What are the advantages of using the Discussion Board? ディスカッションボードの強みは何ですか？