

On the Application of Discourse Cohesion Theory to English Reading Teaching in Senior High School

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Abstract

Improving students' reading ability has always been an important goal of English teaching in senior high school. However, English reading teaching nowadays has simply focused on translation, grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. Discourse analysis that is more important for students to improve reading ability, has received surprisingly little attention. Cohesion theory initially proposed by Halliday and Hasan is an important part of discourse analysis. The dozens of studies on cohesion theory carried out over the past 40 years have mostly focused on the theory research, while the practical application to English teaching and its strategies have been much ignored. In the research of English teaching, most people pay more attention to the application of cohesion theory to English writing, translation, and reading teaching in college, but neglect the application of cohesion theory to reading teaching in senior high school. This paper is a tentative probe into applying cohesion theory to English reading teaching in senior high school. Its purpose is to discuss strategies of cohesion theory in English reading class and to offer teachers some new perspectives of teaching reading.

Keywords

Discourse Cohesion Theory; English Reading; Reading Ability.

1. Introduction

Nowadays both primary and secondary schools place much emphasis on the English reading teaching. Reading is considered as a basic skill for students to learn a foreign language. It plays a dominant role among the five skills in the learning of a foreign language. It is absolutely necessary for people in the society nowadays since a large amount of information one needs to know is presented in written materials or pictures. For most English learners in China who have few chances to communicate with native speakers of English, the importance of reading is essentially critical than that of listening and speaking in language learning.

However, at present, most English teachers in senior high school still use bottom-up model to deal with reading lessons. That is to say the classes almost focus on vocabulary, grammatical structures, pronunciation and detailed information. In practical teaching, teachers find that it is difficult for students to grasp the main ideas and the themes of a passage even after teachers explain the discourse sentence by sentence or word by word. Most students fail to write a passage summary after teachers lead them to go through the detailed information of the passage. Some students may know the grammatical rules well and have a large amount of vocabulary and phrases, but they also cannot make up a relatively coherent discourse or take good advantage of the cohesive devices like reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion. Lack of guidance of cohesive theory in reading has been found to be problematic for many English study learners [1]. These kinds of problems go beyond the scope of the vocabulary and grammar. They are closely relevant to the discourse coherence that is how sentences are put together to make a coherent and cohesive text.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Discourse Cohesion Theory

2.1.1. Definition of Cohesion

Halliday and Hasan published a significant book named *Cohesion in English* in 1976 in which they discussed the definition of cohesion and cohesion devices. They consider the concept of cohesion as a semantic one which refers to relations of meaning within the text. And when does the cohesion happen in the discourse? They point out, "Cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some elements in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one presupposes the other, in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by resource to it. When this happens, a relation of cohesion is set up, and the two elements, the presupposing and the presupposed, are thereby at least potentially integrated into a text" [2].

2.1.2. Devices of Cohesion

Halliday and Hasan have elaborated on the devices of cohesion in *Cohesion in English*. In their opinion, the cohesion devices can be classified into two categories namely grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. In addition, each category can be subdivided.

Grammatical cohesion, also called structural cohesion, includes reference, ellipsis, substitution, and conjunction. Reference is a participant or circumstantial element introduced at one place in the text, which can be taken as a reference point for something that follows. Substitution, a grammatical relation, is the replacement of one item in a sentence or a clause by another and in English, the substitution may function as a noun, a verb or a clause. Ellipsis is the omission of an item in a sentence or a clause. In addition, they divide ellipsis into three types namely nominal, verb, and clause ellipsis. The fourth and final type of grammatical cohesion is conjunction. Conjunction is a means to demonstrate the logical relationship among different parts of a text according to the use of conjunction components. By using conjunction elements, people can understand the semantic connections among sentences and even predict the logical meaning of subsequent sentences based on the preceding sentences. According Halliday and Hasan, conjunctions are subdivided into four types: additive (a relationship of coordination), adversative (a relationship of opposition), causal (a reason-consequence relationship) and temporal (a relationship of order).

The other category is lexical cohesion including reiteration and collocation. Halliday and Hasan state that reiteration involves the repetition of a lexical item and the use of a general word to refer back to a lexical item which is usually called synonym, near-synonym, or superordinate, or general word. Hyponyms are also involved in reiteration. Collocation is achieved through the association of lexical items that roughly co-occur, including antonymy and complementarity.

2.2. Research of Application of Discourse Cohesion Theory in English Reading Teaching

Jacobson first mentioned the application of discourse cohesion theory in English teaching. Parsons studied the relationship between the number of cohesion devices and discourse coherence in the cohesion chains, and the relationship between the way of discourse cohesion and the degree of discourse coherence. Stanovich [3] and Irwin [4] noted in their studies that increased reading ability has a strong relationship with proficiency in the mastery of cohesion devices. McCarthy [5] in his study pointed out that discourse cohesion theory can be used to make a complete semantic text. Hoey believed that the construction of the text mainly depended on the lexical cohesion, so he devoted himself to vocabulary study. Finally, he found the vocabulary repetition connection model in the text. In 2000, Hoey published the book *Textual Interaction: An Introduction to Written Discourse Analysis*, providing teachers with some new ideas in the teaching of reading and writing. Grabe [6] argued that lexical devices play a crucial

role in discourse cohesion and suggested that it is necessary for teachers to pay attention to the development of cohesion devices present in the discourse reading teaching.

Scholars in China have been discussing how to apply cohesion theory to English language teaching so as to improve the quality of English language teaching. Huang Guowen discussed discourse analysis and discourse cohesion in *Essentials of Text Analysis* published in 1988. He pointed that both coherence and cohesion were the important features of the texture and cohesion was presented in the surface structure of the texture [7]. *Suggestions for Teachers to Apply Cohesion Theory to English Reading Teaching*

2.3. Systematically Present Knowledge of Discourse Cohesion in English Teaching

Senior high school students' input of English language knowledge much depends on teachers' instruction and guidance due to limited self-learning ability. In order to develop students' linguistic knowledge and reading strategies, teachers in English teaching should systematically present knowledge of text cohesion like cohesion devices which can be classified into two categories namely grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. In English teaching, teachers should consciously guide students to understand the main contents and structures of a text by analyzing cohesion devices.

Firstly, in order to make a text coherent, the author of the discourse will often use grammatical cohesion devices includes reference, ellipsis, substitution, conjunction. These devices can also simplify language expression, enhance text logicity and coherence, and help students quickly find out the main ideas and themes. An example can also be seen from this dialogue:

M: Marie, if no one takes care of your children while you're away, Jennifer and I will be glad to have them stay with us.

W: That's very kind of you. But they've already left for their Grandma's. You know, Suzy lives close by.

By analyzing the conjunction word "but", students can well understand that Marie politely refuse the help from the man for taking care of her baby. So teachers should guide students to focus on some grammatical cohesion devices to quickly predict and grasp important messages. Secondly, lexical cohesion devices are frequently used in a text like reiteration and collocation. A writer will usually revolve a topic to construct a passage. To make his or her attitudes and ideas more clear, he or she will reuse the topic words or other words to substitute the topic words like synonyms, hyponyms, superordinate, antonyms and so on. For example, "Jelly likes fruit, such as grape, watermelon, papaya and pineapple." In this sentence, it emphasizes that Jelly really loves fruit by using some hyponyms of fruit. As a consequence, English teachers are supposed to instruct discourse knowledge about cohesion devices in English class.

2.4. Frequently Take Relevant Cohesion Strategies in English Reading

At the beginning of learning discourse cohesion, students may be unable to effectively apply cohesion devices to reading and lack the awareness of using it in reading comprehension. Therefore, at first, English teachers should systematically demonstrate the use of cohesion strategies and guide students to take strategies in reading. Gradually, teachers withdraw their help during the process of students' learning so that students can become independent and autonomous learners.

To begin with, teachers should design meaningful and suitable reading tasks which are within senior high school students' language level according to different reading objectives and materials. For senior high school students, the cultivation of reading ability should be much emphasized. There are some common tasks like making reference and reading comprehension question such as word-guessing questions, questions for main idea, and questions for specific information.

Then they should guide students to take cohesion devices to understand the passage so as to work out many tasks. For example, students can use grammar devices and lexical devices to guess unknown words in a text, and to quickly find out writers' intended meaning and the main idea of the text. Here are two examples. Firstly, using lexical devices to guess a word can be seen from the sentence, "Jelly replied quickly, but after considering the problem carefully, she regretted having made such a hasty decision". Students are required to guess the word "hasty", and they can know the similar meaning between "quick" and "hasty" by analyzing the context meaning so as to know "hasty" which means very quick. Secondly, there is an example demonstrating how to take grammar devices to quickly grasp the main idea and the intended meaning of a text. Here is the text, "When Jelly was a kid, she dreamed of becoming a famous actress. Now she is famous for her lifestyles, clothing as well as her performance. The story of Jelly has a happy ending, but most children with the same wish will never have the opportunity to perform on stage. Many of them will only exercise their performance in their spare time. Unfortunately, acting dreams do not often come true." In the text, if students pay more attention to the conjunction words "but" and "unfortunately", they will grasp the main idea of the paragraph: most people cannot make their acting dream come true. After taking sufficient exercises, students may cultivate a sense of using cohesion strategies in English reading. Consequently, they can work out relevant tasks quickly and effectively. Hence students are suggested to do many relevant and meaningful tasks in and after class.

2.5. Promptly Assess Effects of Applying Cohesion Theory to Reading

English teachers are suggested to promptly assess the effects of taking cohesion strategies in reading teaching in order to understand how much students know after learning and applying, so that teachers can immediately adjust their teaching plans and methods.

In presentation stage, teachers can be aware of how much students know by asking questions and observing. Also teachers can give a topic relevant to the materials of the class and require students to work in groups to use cohesion knowledge to narrate or make a dialogue. Therefore, teachers will well know students' performance and students will have more chances to interact and exchange opinions so as to deepen the understanding of using cohesion devices.

In production stage, teachers should flexibly adjust their teaching plans according to students' different needs after testing and observing students' performance. For example, if some students well grasp the knowledge about cohesion devices and can use them proficiently, then the teacher should give them some more difficult but suitable tasks, and allow them more time to exercise independently. If students have problems in applying cohesion strategies, teachers are suggested to provide additional guidance in instructing cohesion knowledge and strategies. It should be born in mind that when giving assessment, teachers should combine formative and productive assessment together, be gentle and honest, and not hurt students' hearts.

3. Conclusion

The paper has discussed the importance and application of discourse cohesion theory to teaching and learning. It has briefly introduced the importance and current situation of reading teaching, a literature review about cohesion theory, the application of grammatical devices and lexical devices to English reading teaching to help students acquire some reading strategies, and three strategies for teachers to take cohesion theory to English reading. Obviously, this paper takes cohesion theory in teaching, which offers English teachers new perspectives and implications towards reading teaching. They may consciously guide and train students in real classroom teaching to take advantage of cohesion devices to analyze and understand the text. Certainly, there are some limitations such as lack of specific data to prove the real effects due to lack of empirical research methods or experiment researches. It also omits some other factors such as readers' interest, motivation, prior background knowledge, the context, cultural

difference and extra. Further research is suggested to take as many as factors into consideration. In conclusion, the thesis is only a tentative effort, and there are other fields not to be further explored.

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