

Awareness of Referential Devices in Text and Reading Comprehension

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Abstract: Hassan's (1976) classification of these devices as personal, comparative, and demonstrative on the reading ability of the present study explored the role of learners' awareness of referential devices in texts based on Halliday and learners. To support this, 30 male students aged between 13 and 20 were selected out of 180 students studying English at Iran Language Institute. All the subjects were elementary 3 students and were chosen considering their final reading scores they got in elementary 2 to make the sample almost homogeneous. They were randomly divided into two groups of 15 subjects. Through a 20-session term, 10 passages were taught to both experimental and control groups through a similar methodology for teaching reading at this Institute. The only difference was that we made our experimental group practice finding referents. We helped them through oral questions, group work, and also taught them specific strategies taken from TOEFL FLASH SERIES. The subjects in the control group only received the method common in the Institute. We gave them a post-test on the last session. This was a multiple-choice reading test including two short passages each followed by 5 questions. A t-test was taken to compare the mean scores of the groups. The results confirmed the hypothesis and showed a significant improvement on the reading ability of subjects in the experimental group. In the end, some pedagogical implications were made.

Key Words: Reference-Cohesion-Referential Devices.

Introduction

Reading is discursively viewed as an interactive process of communication between readers and writers through the text (classroom lectures on discourse analysis). A text has textual features which collectively constitute its 'texture' and distinguish it from non-text. 'Cohesion' of which referential devices are sub-types helps bring about a semantic continuity and is very important to deal with in reading process.

Cohesion

Cohesion has been defined in a number of ways. Halliday and Hassan (1976) hold the view that the primary determinant of whether a set of sentences do or do not constitute a text depends on cohesive relationships within and between sentences. They consider a text as a unified whole which is easily recognized from one which is not. In spoken and written discourses, individual clauses and utterances are semantically linked by grammatical connections (McCarthy, 1991). Malmkjar (2004, 543) defines cohesion as "the way in which linguistic items are meaningfully connected to each other sequentially on the basis of grammatical rules."

Widdowson defines it in terms of the distinction that is made between the illocutionary act and the proposition. In his view (P.52), propositions, when linked together, form a "text" whereas illocutionary acts, when related to each other, create different kinds of "discourse."

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), cohesion and register enable us to create a text. Register is concerned with what a text means. It is defined by Halliday and Hasan as the "set of semantic configuration that is typically associated with a particular class of context of situation, and defines the substance of the text."

Cohesion, as contrasted with register, is not concerned with what a text means. Rather, it refers to a set of *meaning relations* that exist within the text. These relations are not of the kind that links the components of a sentence and they differ from sentential structure. The discovery of these meaning relations is crucial to its interpretation. For instance, in the following text:

Mary bought a new pencil. She put it in her drawer.

The interpretation of the elements *she* and *it* is dependent on the lexical items *Mary* and *Pencil*. So, cohesion is in the semantic relation that is setup between these elements.

According to Halliday and Hasan, the function of cohesion is to relate one part of a text to another part of the same text. Consequently, it lends continuity to the text. By providing this kind of text continuity, cohesion enables the reader or listener to supply all the components of the picture to its interpretation. Halliday and Hasan hold that cohesion in its normal form, is the presupposition of something that has gone before in the discourse, whether in the immediately preceding sentence or not. This form of presupposition is referred to as *anaphoric*. The presupposing item may point forward to something following it. This type of presupposition is called

cataphoric. On the other hand, *exophoric* and *endophoric* presuppositions refer to an item of information outside and inside the text, respectively.

They recognize five sub-types of cohesive in English and in the lexicogrammatical system of the language. They are *reference*, *substitution*, *ellipsis*, *conjunction*, and *lexical cohesion*. Reference, substitution, and ellipsis are grammatical; lexical cohesion is lexical; conjunction stands on the border line between the two categories. In other words, it is mainly grammatical but sometimes involves lexical selection.

Constructionalists view language comprehension as an interactive process between the text and the person using the text. They assume that meaning does not exist in the text but becomes available to the reader as a result of his own contribution. Language users employ text in comprehension as a set of guidelines to the active (re)creation of meaning.

Jonz (1987) in his explanation of the advantage(s) of adopting a constructionist point of view says:

... one is able to speculate on the structure of language knowledge and on the various stages in the acquisition of such structures as well as their application to the cognitive tasks involved in comprehending.

From the above statement, it follows that constructionists emphasize the role of background knowledge as a feature of a text; and the cognitive tasks involved in the comprehension process.

Reference

One of the most considerable cohesive devices is reference. Different types of reference have been mentioned by theorists of which we choose to refer to that of Halliday and Hassan(1976).They identify three sub-types of referential devices: personal, demonstrative, and comparative.

Personal reference: They serve to identify individuals and objects that are named at some other points in the text. Example: "Mary did not have to change the method. **She** could have chosen to teach as others did".

Demonstrative reference: It is expressed through determiners and adverbs. These devices represent items ranging from a single word, a phrase, and even to a whole paragraph.

Example: "Recognizing that the country had to change, the president stated some political reforms and developed some promotions. **This** did not happen".

Comparative reference: It serves to compare items within a text In terms of identity and similarity. These are expressive adjectives and adverbs. Example: "I don't like these gloves. Actually, I'd like the other gloves".

Method

Participants

The subjects in this study were 30 male EFL learners. They were elementary 3 students and had studied almost four terms at the Iran Language Institute at the time this study was performed. They aged between 13 and 20.

The subjects were selected from among 180 students in elementary 3 in spring 2010 on the basis of the scores they got in their elementary 2 reading section.

Procedure

During a term including 20 sessions, ten passages were taught to both groups through almost a fixed method written in advance by the research team of the Institute. The subjects in the experimental group were also trained to practice finding referents to referential devices through group work as well as putting forward appropriate oral questions. Some strategies were also taken from TOEFL Flash from the unit named "Reference" and taught to them. However, the subjects in the control group only received the method of the Institute. In the last session, two short passages each followed by five multiple-choice tests were given. They were told that they would not be scored for the test to remove anxiety and motivate them for the final. A t-test was taken to compare the scores of two groups.

Results

To see if there is any improvement in the performance of our experimental group, a t-test was taken to compare the mean scores of subjects in both groups. The following table shows the results:

Paired t-test for comparing the scores of control and experimental groups

Groups	N	X	SD	T-value
Experimental	15	8.4	1.121	
Control	15	7.13	.915	
				.001

Table-1

As it is seen on the table above, a t-value of .001 is statistically very significant at the .05 level of significance to reject the stated null hypothesis. So, we can support our hypothesis that preparing students with strategies to guess the referents of referential devices and making them aware of these linking devices can improve their reading ability.

Pedagogical implications

Some pedagogical implications of this study can be drawn for both EFL reading and translation equivalence. As it was mentioned before, cohesion is a semantic relation and functions to pair and chain items across sentences that are related. It brings about semantic continuity in a text. It can be claimed that comprehension of a text partly depends on recovering the cohesive elements, so the reader needs to attend to them. These cohesive elements should be attended to in an EFL reading class. Translation is defined as establishing equivalence in textual material between source and target language. Newmark (in Fleet and Threadgold, 1987) states that the topic of cohesion is the most useful area of discourse analysis applicable to translation. Lotfipour-Saedi (1991) offers a discursal framework for the characterization of translation equivalence. He states that equivalence is established in terms of eight dimensions: vocabulary, structure, texture, sentence meaning versus utterance meaning, language varieties, presuppositions, cognitive effect, and aesthetic effect. Thus, in establishing translation equivalence between the source and target language, these dimensions should be met by the translator. Of these only the third one 'texture' is related to our study.

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