

## Discourse Analysis and the Development of English Listening Comprehension for Non-English Fields of Studies in Iran

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### Abstract

Comprehension is a receptive skill, as opposed to speaking, which is productive. But this does not mean it is a passive skill. Much to the contrary, listening comprehension is an interactive process in which listeners interact with the text, the tasks and the context external (situation) and internal (background knowledge) to them. Traditional approaches to listening teaching mainly focused on the sentence level and regard the listening process in a passive and static way. To overcome such a deficiency, a new listening approach, that is, discourse-driven approach has been introduced in the listening classroom. The present study is to observe the correlation between the theories of discourse analysis and the nature of listening comprehension and to trace the developmental differences in the learners' listening proficiency brought from this discourse-oriented approach. Through analysis of listening difficulties, the present study confirmed the effectiveness of discourse-oriented approach, which might add a bit more to the understanding of discourse analysis. Pedagogically, it suggested a relatively uncomplicated procedure that might have considerable and varied payoffs in terms of both teaching and learning of the listening skill.

**Keywords:** discourse analysis, listening comprehension, cohesion and coherence, relevance

### INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension is a cognitive activity in which listeners, based on their schemata, interpret whatever they listen. Listening comprehension used to be viewed as a process which involved the decoding of sounds in a linear fashion, from the smallest meaningful units (phonemes) to larger ones. This approach is known as bottom-up information processing mode. Some aspects of discourse depend more on textual information, as the items at the bottom of the list below. Others, however, can only be interpreted when the listeners' schemata come into play. There are some key factors which interact to contribute to the difficulty of Listening. Among them are text function, text features, processing load, and some of the features of oral language. The opening of a listening lesson containing schema building tasks which focus on motivation and the provision of contextual information. The listening lesson can be aimed at perception or at comprehension. Perception tasks are typically bottom-up, whereas comprehension tasks integrate bottom-up and top-down modes of perception. Listening for perception

lessons focus on features of connected speech, such as reduced forms, stress and rhythm or on the identification of grammatical, lexical or functional items. Based on structural linguistics and behaviorism, traditional approach of listening teaching only focuses on the form and structure of language, and views listening process in a static and passive way. Students function as a tape recorder by absorbing and storing aural messages in much the same way as the machine. The listening teaching only stays at sentence level and the discourse meaning is greatly ignored. In fact, when people listen, whether they are listening to a lecture, a news broadcast, a joke, or are engaging in a conversation, they are listening to discourse.

With the development of functional linguistics in the 1970s, people turned to the study of the social functions of language. Language is considered as a way of communication, a means of thought but not an isolated structural system. At the same time, with the development of cognitive psychology, many researchers began to pay attention to the study of listening comprehension process and try to reveal the nature of listening comprehension with the aid of discourse analysis theories such as the discourse macro-structure, cognitive schema, context, relevance, cohesion and coherence. They found that although the discourse is organized by a series of sentences, the understanding of a sentence does not necessarily mean the understanding of a text. The listening comprehension of a discourse involves many factors. In order to compensate for the deficiency of traditional listening comprehension approach, a new one, that is, discourse-oriented approach was introduced into the classroom.

Although the research achievements of discourse analysis have been largely applied to EFL reading and writing teaching, the traditional method still shrouds the field of listening to a certain extent. Therefore, this research is intended to first identify the reasons for senior English majors' listening failure by a semi-open interview, then apply some relevant discourse analysis theories to the listening teaching in purpose of finding out some effective pedagogical implications available for college English listening teaching and making it clear that discourse-oriented approach can be and should be used in listening teaching and learning. It answers the call from the following aspects:

- In language teaching, there has been a growing tendency to become more 'discourse-oriented'. Compared with sentence-oriented approach, we have become increasingly aware that discourse-oriented approach to listening teaching is more helpful to the teachers and the students.

- Listening comprehension is definitely not a passive activity. In the listening process, participants must take full advantage of their prior knowledge related to the listening materials. Meanwhile, they must do their utmost to seek out the relevant links. The process of listening is virtually a process of presumption, inference, verification, reassumption, reverification and memorization. Schema theory and relevance theory in discourse analysis provide us with forceful instructions. So in this paper, the present author will adopt both schemata theory and relevance theory as her theoretical foundation.

- It seems impossible to arrive at an adequate interpretation of a certain listening text. Therefore, there is no need to study text sentence by sentence. According to Harris (1952, p. 25), language does not exist in unrelated words and sentences but in cohesive and coherent discourse. Some language teaching methodologists therefore point out that discourse must be taken into account in English teaching. In this sense, discourse analysis gives us a new insight to listening comprehension teaching.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a variety of definitions to discourse. Gillian Brown and George Yule (1987, p. 76) define discourse as “language in use”. And according to Guy Cook (1989, p. 45), discourse is a stretch of “language perceived to be meaningful, unified and purposive”. Schiffrin (1987, p. 87) points out that functionalists and formalists view discourse differently. The former defines the study of discourse as the study of “any aspect of language use” because discourse is interdependent with social life and its analysis interacts with meanings, activities, and system outside of itself. In this paper the author will adopt the functionalist view and set forth the following statement as the working definition of discourse: *Discourse refers to a meaningful series of utterances used in specific context or stretches of language perceived to be meaningful, unified and purposive.* A discourse may be either a sentence or a continuous stretch of language larger than a sentence, constituting a coherent unit. It is not a grammatical unit but a semantic and even a pragmatic one. According to McCarthy (1991, p. 121), discourse is concerned with the study of the relation between language and the context in which it is used. It is both a study of the formal linguistic qualities of stretches of language by individuals and groups.

As a new branch of linguistics, discourse analysis got its independence at the end of 1960s and the early 1970s, which involved the linguistics, philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology, cognitive science etc. Over the past three decades, the study of discourse analysis has seen a considerable growth. Some theories of discourse analysis such as cohesion, coherence, relevance and so on are applied to foreign language teaching and are very important for improving the language interpretation, esp. for writing, reading and listening comprehension. Discourse analysis is the study of the relationship between language and its context. It is associated with different disciplines, including linguistics, semiotics, psychology, anthropology and sociology.

It was American linguist Zellig Harris who was the first linguist to bring forward discourse analysis. In 1952, in his *Discourse Analysis*, he tried to use structural methods to analyze coherent spoken and written discourse beyond sentence and link language study with culture. In 1960s, some sociologists (e.g., Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, et al) raised to a new level the studies of discourse analysis. They tried to reveal the role of human beings and the influence of language use with discourse analysis in social communication and context as well as to explore the principles in communication. At the same time, German linguists made a great contribution to discourse analysis. Text linguistics was first put forward by a former West German linguist H. Winrich in 1967. He said that all of the language study should be within discourse framework, otherwise

there is no linguistics. In 1970s, a lot of famous scholars (e.g., T. A. Van Dijk, Leech, Grice, Brown, Levinson, Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson) were engaged in discourse analysis research. Among them, Jefferson, Sacks and Schegloff made a great contribution to it. They realized the importance of taking turn when people are talking to each other and summarized rules and regulations of conversations. They created turn-taking theory on the basis of conversational analysis. During this period the famous book *cohesion in English* was published by Halliday and Hasan (1972, p. 2). They defined text as any passage, spoken or written, of whatever length, that does form a unified whole. In 1980s, the discourse analysis got full development as an independent discipline.

The application of the discourse analysis to the foreign language teaching, language acquisition and language development also contributes one important part of the discourse analysis and made tremendous progress in recent years. With the development of discourse analysis, foreign language teachers also shifted their attention to the fostering of discourse abilities and communicative competence. Therefore, as a new discipline in applied linguistics, discourse analysis will be of great value and importance for language teaching and learning.

### **The Current Teaching Situations of Listening**

Before we start discussing listening, let's take a few minutes to reflect on the importance of the listening skill. As a language teacher and as a learner of other languages, we should first think of one or two reasons why listening is important. Listening is also important because it occupies a big chunk of the time we spend communicating in the language. Think about the times you spend listening to others speak or listening to songs, news, lectures, YouTube, etc. Recent advances in technology have served to raise the profile of the listening skill in language teaching. It also provides input that can be very significant for second language acquisition in general and for the development of the speaking skill in particular. Moreover it Promotes non-linear processing of language and encourages learners to develop "holistic" strategies to texts. As language teachers, we need to think of how we can incorporate listening into our teaching and provide opportunities both inside and outside the classroom for our students to be exposed to significant listening input. Despite its obvious importance to language learning, the listening skill was for a long time relegated to a marginal place in foreign language curricula. With the advent of communicative language teaching and the focus on proficiency, the learning and teaching of listening started to receive more attention. However, listening is not yet fully integrated into the curriculum and needs to be given more "prime time" in class and homework.

For learners, listening presents a challenge for a variety of reasons, among which are the following:

- **Listening involves multiple modes:** Listening involves the interpersonal and interpretive modes of communication. It requires the listener to assume either a participative role in face-to-face conversations, or a non-participative role in listening to other people speaks or present.

- **Listening involves all varieties of language:** In addition to listening to lectures and presentations in academic and formal settings, learners have also to partake or listen to exchanges that involve various levels of colloquialism.
- **Listening involves "altered" and "reduced" language forms:** In addition to dealing with the vocabulary and structures of the language, listeners have to learn to comprehend reduced forms of the language (e.g., *I wanna go*, *Just a sec*).
- **Listening involves variable rates of delivery:** Unlike a reading text that is at the learner's control, a listening text is constantly moving and at variable speeds that often cannot be controlled by the listener.

Because of all these factors, listening activities often create high levels of anxiety and stress among learners that can interfere with comprehension.

The traditional listening teaching approach greatly hinders the improvement of the students' listening comprehension skills at a higher level. However, it still shrouds the field of listening teaching to a certain extent in some colleges and universities nationwide, which is a real headache. If we look closely at the present situation of listening teaching in most schools, we can still easily detect some common characteristics of the traditional listening teaching. In a typical traditional listening class, teachers usually begin a listening class with introducing some difficult words as well as some brief background knowledge in relation to the upcoming listening text. The result is that listeners turn their ears up to the listening text only to be overwhelmed by streams of unfamiliar, strange sounds. Under such circumstances, listeners easily get bored and tired for lack of interest and enthusiasm. In such a teacher-dominated class, listeners are usually demotivated and reduced to passive receivers of the incoming input. What is worse is that learners are very likely to get into bad and harmful listening habits.

As a consequence, listeners are likely to undergo repeated experience of failure. When they come across the same problems again later, they will still be at a loss. More terribly, teachers usually tend to focus on the outcomes of listening, rather than listening itself, upon product rather than process, which can be reflected when success in listening is measured by correct responses to questions or tasks. When a learner supplies a correct answer, there is almost no indication as to how that answer has been arrived at. Such an approach to teaching listening is more like testing listening rather than teaching how to listen and how to cope with the students' listening problems in the class. As a matter of fact, wrong answers can be seen to be more significant than correct ones. The teacher should manage to identify and redress learners' weaknesses as listeners

## METHOD

### Subjects

The subjects in the present study are 60 randomly-chosen non-English majors in the foreign language department of a university in Iran. The subjects, at the time of data

collection, had been learning English as a foreign language in different language institutes for 9 years. In the present study, the 60 subjects were divided into two classes: class A and class B. Class A was the experimental one which employed the discourse-oriented approaches and Class B was the control one which sticks to the traditional approach. Randomization was used to control the effects of the extraneous variables.

### **Instruments**

Two data collection instruments are used in the present study: semi-structured interview and test. In order to find the answers to research question one, that is, what are the difficulties students are faced in listening comprehension? A semi-structured interview is conducted before the teaching experiment so as to prove whether the listening difficulties are connected with discourse or not. If the difficulties are connected with discourse, the experimental study can be continued. For the experimental study, the listening part of CET-4 (College English Test) are applied to answer the research question, that is, whether the discourse analysis model can help non- English majors make further improvement in listening comprehension or not?

### **Procedure**

For the interview, totally 12 subjects were chosen according to their different levels of English listening proficiency based on their final achievements in listening discourse. During the interview, the subjects were guided to describe their difficulties they have met with when they try to improve their listening proficiency. All of the participants showed great cooperation during the whole process. After the interview, recordings were analyzed and generalized. For the experimental research, eight weeks were devoted to the teaching experiment. During this course, it was the author to teach the two classes. The subjects of each class had listening course twice a week. Both of the two classes studied in the language lab. The only difference between the two classes was the listening teaching approach. At the end of the experiment, a listening test was conducted in these two classes to examine the teaching result of the discourse-oriented approach.

### **Data Collection**

The interview was conducted by the researcher on his own with a tape-recorder used to record the answers of the subjects. After the interview, the present author, with the help of other two teachers, listened to the recordings and analyzed and generalized the difficulties of those subjects. The final achievements of the two classes would be input into the computer to do the independent and paired samples test with the help of the software SPSS.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Difficulties Students Have in Listening Process

#### *Confidence*

In listening comprehension, a good listener will not listen to all the words of the listening task. They may skip any part of it and just focus on the information that they need for their answer. Listening word by word or listening for detail, as they think, is very important to get the main ideas. Once they try to comprehend every single word, there is little chance for them to discover the key words which give them clues to understand the listening text. In our first language, we skim over parts of the message and pay attention to relevant parts only. Thus sentences are not processed word by word and the focus is placed on the ideas behind these words and how these ideas are linked together to draw conclusions. Brown (1992). As Hedge (2000, p. 237) pointed out that, instead of listening to every word in their first language, many language learners tend to integrate their linguistic competence, experience and background knowledge to comprehend the text. Many language learners fail to realize that when they listen to their first language they do not actually hear every word. They also fail to appreciate that we integrate linguistic knowledge with our existing experience and knowledge of such things as topic and culture, and do not need to hear every word. This means that learners often have unrealistic expectations and try to understand each word of a listening text. As Faerch and Kasper (1986, p. 265) pointed out: 'such total comprehension ... is a misconception of how normal comprehension works in the native language'. Learners' anxiety can be exacerbated by a classroom procedure which does not contextualize the text or prepare the topic by activating prior knowledge; in other words, a procedure which asks students to 'Listen to the text and then answer the questions' add students' anxiety instead. This tests listening ability rather than aiming to teach it.

Adults returning to English language learning whose earlier experiences have been of this nature may well have developed negative perceptions of their ability as listeners and a major task for the teacher will be to build confidence. This means recognizing anxiety and taking care to provide positive classroom experiences. For example, the teacher needs to make sure that the pace and length of a listening activity is not too taxing as the concentration required in trying to comprehend unfamiliar sounds can be tiring. There are some listening situations in which the language heard is similar to written prose, such as in a lecture which is read, or scripted news broadcast. However, a good deal of listening is to informal colloquial English. Teachers are preparing students for this kind of listening outside the classroom; they need to be aware of its characteristics. Traditionally, the language of audio recordings for ELT has been fairly slow, restricted in various ways, and often repetitive, in order to facilitate comprehension.

There are strong arguments for using recordings with some of the features listed on the right with learners at lower levels. Particularly when the purpose of the listening is for

input and the text presents grammar, vocabulary, and certain phonological features. However, if another purpose is to develop the ability to deal with listening outside the classroom, then texts will be needed which present natural language. And this implies familiarizing students with colloquial speech and variety of pace and accent, developing their vocabulary, developing their awareness of how referring expressions such as pronouns are used, and helping them to use any markers in the discourse which will aid prediction.

### ***Difficulties of Content***

Learners who are unfamiliar with the background knowledge required to make sense of a text will experience difficulty in inferring and interpreting meaning. In order to understand the content, we need to know something of the conventions surrounding the topic. The language is not likely to cause problems but a lack of schematic knowledge may well do so. The major implication here for teaching listening is the need for a pre-listening stage in which existing prior knowledge can be activated and missing prior knowledge can be introduced.

### ***Visual Difficulties***

In most situations, listening is not just an aural activity. We are usually able to see the speaker, who provides non-verbal clues to meaning, for example, lip movements, facial expressions, and gestures. In a review of studies exploring the role of vision in speech perception, Kellerman (1990, p. 274) reports evidence that the visual element should not be neglected as speech perception is a bi-modal process. The role of vision in first language listening, especially lip movements, is particularly important when the auditory input is of poor quality. If the speaker is visible in most real listening situations, then the use of audio cassettes in the classroom is unnecessarily restricting. Learners must focus on what they hear and cannot use paralinguistic clues to meaning. Classrooms may have poor acoustics, and recordings may be of poor quality. Also, the teacher has to take time presenting something of the setting so that the contextual clues to meaning are available. The use of audio recordings can provide practice for those situations where the speaker is not visible such as telephone conversations or radio programs, but the availability of video cassettes has undoubtedly assisted learners and has enabled teachers to point out cultural differences in paralinguistic feature such as the use of facial expression and gesture. Many teachers will have experienced difficulty in persuading learners to return to work with audio cassettes once they have experienced the visual element of video cassettes. Where teachers are fortunate enough to have both video and audio recordings available, perhaps each technical resource should be exploited for its own range of useful activities and, in addition, the teacher, as a live speaker, should come back into prominence for some aspects of listening work. The importance of dealing with these various difficulties from an early stage in the teaching of listening is highlighted by Eastman, who discusses the tendency of intermediate listeners to use translation as they listen, a strategy which is generally considered to be problematic and inefficient. Eastman (1991, p. 181) suggests that the reasons for this tendency include anxiety, the expectation that the listener needs to

understand every word, transfer from a word-by-word reading comprehension strategy, inadequate prior learning of vocabulary, and inappropriate teaching which fails to contextualize the content of the listening passage or which encourages word-by-word analysis. The issue to which we now turn is how to develop an effective methodology for the teaching of listening, one which deals with the points and pitfalls raised so far.

From the above description, we can find a close relationship between discourse analysis and students' difficulties in listening improvement, so the application of the study of discourse analysis to assist students' listening comprehension is feasible. Discourse analysis suggests a way of studying formal features of language across sentence to arrive at high level discourse interpretation, makes up for the disadvantages of traditional approach and hence opens up a wider perspective for teaching of listening.

### The Experimental Results and Discussion

#### The Comparison between the Two Tests of the Control Group

Table 1 is the result of Paired Samples Test. The value of df is 29. P, that is, Sig. (2-tailed) is 0.119. Because the value of  $P > 0.05$ , the listening proficiency of the pretest and the posttest are not significantly different. Based on the statistics of Table 1 and Table 2, we can say that the traditional approach of EFL listening teaching does not efficiently help students make improvement in listening proficiency.

**Table 1.** Paired samples test

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig.
				Lower	Upper			
PRE-POST	-.9333	3.1833	.5812	2.1220	.2553	-1.606	29	.119

**Table 2.** Paired samples statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
PRE	5.9667	30	1.4016	.2559
POST	8.4000	30	2.3134	.4224

When the comparison of the pretest and posttest of the same group is conducted, Paired Sample T-test should be employed. Table 2 is Paired Samples Statistics. From Table 2, we can see that the mean score of pretest is 5.9667, posttest is 8.4000. The mean score of posttest is greatly higher than that of pretest. The Standard Deviation of pretest is 1.4016, posttest is 2.3134. That is to say, the score of pretest is small diversified than posttest.

**Table 3.** Paired samples test

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig.
				Lower	Upper			
PRE-POST	2.6351	-2.4333	.4811	-3.4173	-1.4494	-5.058	29	.021

It is the result of Paired Samples Test. The value of df is 29. P, that is, Sig. (2-tailed) is 0.021. Because the value of  $P < 0.05$ , the listening proficiency of the pretest and the posttest are significantly different. Based on the statistics of Table 2 and Table 3, we can say that the discourse-oriented approach of EFL listening teaching to some extent efficiently help students make further improvement in listening proficiency.

## CONCLUSION

The relation between the language and the context in which it is used is studied in the discourse analysis. Cohesion and coherence are two important terms in discourse analysis and considerable attention has been focused on cohesion and coherence. Although different linguists have different views on relations between cohesion and coherence, they all concur that both of them play a very important role in textual composition and textual comprehension. They are not only cores of discourse analysis but also ways of thinking. However, the cohesion and coherence knowledge itself cannot guarantee the improvement of listening comprehension. Therefore, another two theories in discourse analysis are put forward, that is, schema theory and relevance theory.

Schema theory is currently widely used in the teaching of reading, writing as well as listening comprehension. It accounts for the role of the listener's background knowledge in language comprehension and tells us that the language comprehension is a process between new information and the old one. Although schema theory contributes greatly to discourse interpretation, it is still imperfect, because it cannot provide explicit explanation of all the phenomena or processes concerning listening comprehension. Therefore, relevance theory is used as a compensation for the disadvantages of schema theory on language interpretation. As a whole, relevance theory aims at explaining discourse relevance from the perspective of cognitive science, and hence disclosing psychological devices of discourse interpretation. Although the main purpose of relevance theory is by no means to explain discourse coherence, this theory has provided coherence theory with beneficial supplement.

There are also some other concepts in discourse analysis, which are very important for successful listening comprehension. Discourse markers are important to the study of language acquisition because the particular pragmatic, semantic and syntactic features that define them demonstrate the subtle interplay between form and function. However, texts are sometimes coherent not because of the discourse markers but because the information in them is structured in a particular way. Many texts are organized into larger patterns, as listeners, we can use to help find out our way round the information in a text. They are mainly: Question-answer pattern, claim-counterclaim pattern,

general-specific pattern, rhetorical pattern and background-problem-solution-evaluation pattern. Another important concept mentioned is context, which can be divided into two categories: the linguistic context and the non-linguistic context. It plays an important role in discourse interpretation. According to me, to achieve better understanding of context constructing coherence, listeners are surely to bridge over the difficulties with some covert cohesive devices as follows: context, discourse structure, background knowledge, language style and discourse topic.

From the above experimental results, we can see discourse-oriented approach is more efficient than the traditional listening teaching approach in helping students make further improvement. In the conduction of a discourse-oriented approach in college English class, three elements are worth considering. First, in order to build new background knowledge and activate existing background knowledge of listening content, teachers can include the following pre-listening activities: viewing movies, listening to related songs or speeches, class discussions or debates role-play activities, predictions about the text; introduction and discussion of new words in the text. Second, in recent EFL listening classroom, the class time is mainly spent on assessment and practice rather than direct students on comprehension skills in the actual teaching of comprehension. In a discourse-oriented listening class, more emphasis should be put on how to listen and how to comprehend the texts. Students should be encouraged to activate their background knowledge, their existing schemata through self-generated questions about the text they are to listen to. Third, according to the difficulties students have in listening, we can conclude selection of appropriate listening material is of great importance. Interest of the material is the first consideration to build students' confidence in listening activity. Students can even select listening materials autonomously. Then, specialized content area is believed to help students build schemata and facilitate comprehension. To have students listen in depth in a content area allows students to become more familiar with a single area, an author's style, or the specialized vocabulary of a topic and develop enough context to facilitate comprehension. With one content area satisfactorily finished, the listening can move on to the next one.

Many texts are organized into larger patterns, as listeners, we can use to help find out our way round the information in a text. They are mainly: Question-answer pattern, claim-counterclaim pattern, general-specific pattern, rhetorical pattern and background-problem-solution-evaluation pattern. Another important concept mentioned is context, which can be divided into two categories: the linguistic context and the non-linguistic context. It plays an important role in discourse interpretation. According to me, to achieve better understanding of context constructing coherence, listeners are surely to bridge over the difficulties with some covert cohesive devices as follows: context, discourse structure, background knowledge, language style and discourse topic.

It's no doubt that the application of discourse analysis in listening comprehension can work wonders. However, it's no easy job to apply the theory to the practice. I adopted a

discourse-oriented approach which divided the listening process into three stages: pre-listening stage, while-listening stage and post-listening stage. At each stage, the teachers are required to apply the discourse analysis in listening comprehension. At the same time, an experiment is performed, the result of which demonstrates that the discourse approach is more effective in improving the student's listening comprehension ability.

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