

# The Application of Discourse Analysis to English Reading Teaching in Chinese Universities—What is the Focus?

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## **Abstract**

*Reading is a primary avenue of language input and the spread of knowledge. Some EFL learners focus on vocabulary and grammar, but ignore the broader relationship between words, sentences and paragraphs in reading. Due to this, it is of great necessity to introduce discourse analysis to English reading teaching because of its potential to improve students' discourse awareness and reading comprehension. While discourse analysis covers three aspects, structure of discourse, cohesion and coherence, and background information and context, this paper aimed to identify the ideal focus of discourse-based English reading teaching and to uncover pedagogical differences between English majors and non-English majors in Chinese universities. The research findings show that Chinese students have a good sense of discourse in general, and the main difference between English majors and non-English majors is that English majors are more inclined to grasp the main idea by analyzing the structure of discourse. The pedagogical implication is that if discourse-based reading teaching is applied for non-English major students, it should focus more on reading strategies related to the structure of discourse.*

## **Keywords**

*English reading teaching, discourse analysis, structure of discourse, EFL learners*

## **1. Introduction**

Traditional English reading teaching puts a lot of emphasis on word usage and syntax, and “most efforts to ‘teach’ reading [are] centered on the use of reading to examine grammar and vocabulary” (Grabe, 1991, p. 376). Such teaching methods lead many undergraduate EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners to “spend long hours laboring over sentence-by-sentence translation”, “have difficulties getting any overall meaning”, and “attribute their difficulties to a lack of English proficiency” (Auerbach & Paxton, 1997, p. 238, p. 244). Some scholars have noticed the problem that EFL learners focus too much on meanings at the word level and sentence level, but overlook the

importance of the overall text meaning. Teaching discourse analysis can address this problem in the way that it considers “situational context and existential meaning” and focuses on linguistic units above the sentence level as well as on their sequences (Lezberg & Hilferty, 1978, p. 47). Research on how to apply discourse analysis to teaching practice started to flourish in the 1990s, marked by the book *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers* by McCarthy (1991).

More than two decades have passed since discourse analysis was applied in English reading teaching. Thus, students in Chinese universities are expected to have a better sense of discourse and pay more attention to the reading process, especially English major students. While many empirical studies show that discourse analysis as a whole can effectively improve students’ reading performance, there is a lack of understanding about that specifically helps students mainly. It is unnecessary to highlight every aspect of discourse analysis in the teaching if students already know some reading strategies related to it. In order to narrow down the focus of the application of discourse analysis to English reading teaching and identify the pedagogical difference between English majors and non-English majors in Chinese universities, a questionnaire research was carried out at a key university in southern China.

## 2. Literature Review and Research Significance

In his paper “Discourse Analysis” (1995), Zellig Harris addresses the application of discourse analysis, claiming that “language does not occur in stray words or sentences, but in connected discourse” (p. 3). He discusses the linking patterns of sentences through various grammatical devices and the connection between text and social context. Functional linguists Halliday and Hasan (1976) carried out substantial study on textual cohesion, coherence, situational context, and text structure, publishing *Cohesion in English* in 1976. This book views cohesion as an important component of text construction, and analyzes cohesion that arises from semantic relations between sentences. Widdowson (1978) believes that discourse analysis is a study of how sentences are used in communication to achieve social behavior, highlighting the communicative function of language. Based on these previous studies, it is well believed that EFL learners have to take discourse into account if they want to strengthen their communicative competence, viewing language as a meaningful whole.

Starting from the 1980s, the study of discourse analysis has been expanded to language teaching. Gordon and Pearson (1983) investigated the effectiveness of applying theme and structure analysis to teach children reading comprehension. Williams (1983) studied the use of cohesive signals in reading a foreign language. Carrell (1985) researched on formal text pattern training to facilitate ESL reading.

As for comprehensive teaching guidance based on discourse, McCarthy (1991) provides pedagogical suggestions in *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers*. Later, McCarthy and Carter published the book *Language as Discourse: Perspective for Language Teaching* in 1993, which calls for more attention to understanding the language functions in context and teaching the language as discourse. In *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language* (2002), Nuttall outlines the relationship between reading, discourse and teaching, and elaborates on reading skills, reading strategies and how to plan

and teach reading.

The above research findings of discourse analysis in language teaching suggest that EFL learners should read the text as a discourse, read for meaning and be aware of the language functions. Discourse analysis is effective in improving EFL learners' reading skills. When applying discourse analysis to English reading teaching, EFL teachers can focus on three aspects—structure of discourse, cohesion and coherence, and background information and context. However, there is little research on which aspect should receive more attention in the teaching practice and whether there is a significant difference in the focus of discourse-based reading instruction between English majors and non-English majors in Chinese universities.

### **3. Research Design**

#### *3.1 Research Questions*

-What is the focus of discourse analysis application in English reading teaching in Chinese universities?

-Do pedagogical implications of discourse analysis differ between English majors and non-English majors?

#### *3.2 Settings and Participants*

The questionnaire research was conducted at a key comprehensive university in southern China. Two questionnaires were given: a main questionnaire and a follow-up questionnaire.

The main questionnaire was distributed to 234 undergraduates of different majors, 200 of which were successfully completed and collected in the end. Among the participants, 47 were English majors and 153 were non-English majors from a variety of departments, such as mechanical engineering, civil engineering, law, public administration, accounting, finance, physics, Chinese and so on. The participants were from different grades; 79 were freshmen, 69 sophomores, 30 juniors and 22 seniors. The participants were recruited by snowball sampling and they consented to the data collection before they finished the questionnaire.

After the data analysis of the main questionnaire was completed, the follow-up questionnaire was distributed to 26 non-English major participants, who were randomly selected from the previous 153 participants.

#### *3.3 Instruments*

The present research aimed to investigate students' attitudes toward English reading and their reading strategies. There were 15 items in the main questionnaire, using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = "Totally disagree", 2 = "Disagree", 3 = "Neutral", 4 = "Agree", 5 = "Totally agree". Table 1 shows the question design of the main questionnaire. The first five items examined the students' general attitude toward and perception of English reading, including whether they liked it or not, and how to succeed in English reading. The next ten items examined the students' in-process reading strategies and post-reading strategies. Questions on in-process reading strategies fell into three categories—strategies

about structure of discourse, cohesion and coherence, and background information and context.

**Table 1. Question Design of Main Questionnaire**

Component	Item
Component 1: general attitude towards English reading	1
Component 2: perception of English reading	2, 3, 4, 5
Component 3: reading strategies about background information and context	6, 7, 8
Component 4: reading strategies about cohesion and coherence	9, 10, 11, 12
Component 5: reading strategies about structure of discourse	13
Component 6: post-reading strategies	14, 15

An internal consistency reliability test was conducted on the 15 items of the main questionnaire and the previously collected data. According to Table 2, the Cronbach's alpha was .83 (> .80), indicating a good reliability of the questionnaire.

**Table 2. Main Questionnaire's Reliability Statistics**

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.830	15

The follow-up questionnaire aimed to probe into the factors that affected non-English major students' decision to apply discourse structure reading strategies. It addressed non-English major students' understanding of text structure, what specific strategies they used, whether they knew how to analyze the structure and whether they thought the analysis was helpful in understanding the text. An open-ended question about students' experience of applying discourse structure reading strategies was included.

See appendices A and B for the full main questionnaire and follow-up questionnaire respectively.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

All the quantitative data collected from the participants was processed by SPSS16.0. Since English majors were assumed to have better discourse awareness and reading skills, the researcher planned to detect the difference between English majors and non-English majors in terms of their reading attitude and strategies. Therefore, an Independent Samples *t*-test was used to analyze the means of two independent samples.

The qualitative data of non-English majors' experience in applying discourse structure reading strategies served to be supplementary evidence. Textual analysis was conducted to categorize their responses based on different situations of using discourse structure reading strategies.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Analysis of Main Questionnaire

On the subject of students' perception of English reading, more English majors liked reading and they held fewer false perceptions of English reading on average compared to non-English majors based on the descriptive data in Items 1, 2, 3 and 5 (see Table 3). Moreover, the *t*-test (see Table 4) revealed a significant difference between English majors and non-English majors in terms of discourse awareness from Item 2 ( $t = -2.251, p < .05$ ). Much more English majors than non-English majors believed that the mere acquisition of vocabulary and grammar rules could not ensure the understanding of the text. They were more aware of the importance of the relationship between words, sentences, paragraphs and overall text meaning. The statistics almost revealed a significant difference in Item 3 ( $t = -2.608, p < .05$ ), but the standard deviation of all the participants' data was .023 (sig.  $< .05$ ), so the homogeneity of variance was not satisfied. Thus, there was not significant difference between English majors than non-English majors in the belief that making sense of each sentence led to understanding the passage main idea. There was also no significant difference found in Items 4 and 5. A potential reason for the significant difference in Item 2 might be that Chinese high-school English reading class was intensive reading-focused, with an emphasis on vocabulary usage and grammar knowledge. Therefore, many non-English major students believed that the key to successful reading was the mastery of vocabulary and grammar. However, since English majors had more professional knowledge about the English language, they tended not to hold such a perception.

**Table 3. Main Questionnaire's Descriptive Statistics**

	Major	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Item 1	English Major	47	3.55	.855	.125
	Non-English Major	153	3.35	.963	.078
Item 2	English Major	47	3.09	.952	.139
	Non-English Major	153	3.44	.959	.078
Item 3	English Major	47	2.83	.789	.115
	Non-English Major	153	3.24	.972	.079
Item 4	English Major	47	4.21	.657	.096
	Non-English Major	153	4.20	.773	.062
Item 5	English Major	47	2.91	.905	.132
	Non-English Major	153	3.18	1.054	.085
Item 6	English Major	47	3.79	.907	.132
	Non-English Major	153	3.79	.893	.072
Item 7	English Major	47	4.04	.779	.114
	Non-English Major	153	3.94	.813	.066
Item 8	English Major	47	4.32	.783	.114
	Non-English Major	153	4.10	.779	.063
Item 9	English Major	47	3.57	1.037	.151

	Non-English Major	153	3.48	1.020	.082
Item 10	English Major	47	3.85	.978	.143
	Non-English Major	153	3.62	.993	.080
Item 11	English Major	47	3.74	.966	.141
	Non-English Major	153	3.69	1.016	.082
Item 12	English Major	47	3.74	.896	.131
	Non-English Major	153	3.67	.924	.075
Item 13	English Major	47	3.87	.850	.124
	Non-English Major	153	3.55	.993	.080
Item 14	English Major	47	3.60	.970	.142
	Non-English Major	153	3.33	1.093	.088
Item 15	English Major	47	3.43	.950	.139
	Non-English Major	153	3.16	1.083	.088

**Table 4. English Majors and Non-English Majors Independent Samples T-Test Result**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Item 1	Equal variances assumed	.680	.410	1.279	198	.202
	Equal variances not assumed			1.362	84.941	.177
Item 2	Equal variances assumed	.938	.334	-2.251	198	.025
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.260	76.908	.027
Item 3	Equal variances assumed	5.233	.023	-2.608	198	.010
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.910	92.757	.005
Item 4	Equal variances assumed	2.766	.098	.081	198	.935
	Equal variances not assumed			.089	88.505	.930
Item 5	Equal variances assumed	4.549	.034	-1.574	198	.117
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.707	87.733	.091
Item 6	Equal variances assumed	.253	.616	-.024	198	.981
	Equal variances not assumed			-.024	75.449	.981
Item 7	Equal variances assumed	.023	.880	.755	198	.451
	Equal variances not assumed			.772	79.248	.442
Item 8	Equal variances assumed	.395	.531	1.649	198	.101
	Equal variances not assumed			1.645	76.115	.104
Item 9	Equal variances assumed	.021	.886	.532	198	.596
	Equal variances not assumed			.527	75.390	.600
Item 10	Equal variances assumed	.959	.329	1.394	198	.165
	Equal variances not assumed			1.406	77.459	.164
Item 11	Equal variances assumed	.000	.990	.349	198	.728
	Equal variances not assumed			.358	79.786	.721
Item 12	Equal variances assumed	.104	.747	.467	198	.641
	Equal variances not assumed			.475	78.396	.636
Item 13	Equal variances assumed	2.485	.117	2.016	198	.045

	Equal variances not assumed			2.189	87.978	.031
Item 14	Equal variances assumed	.938	.334	1.513	198	.132
	Equal variances not assumed			1.612	84.950	.111
Item 15	Equal variances assumed	1.212	.272	1.529	198	.128
	Equal variances not assumed			1.639	85.931	.105

Students' application of in-process reading strategies and post-reading strategies was investigated from Items 6 to 15. Based on Table 3, the mean scores from Items 6 to 15 were relatively high, ranging from 3.15 to 4.32, indicating that both English majors and non-English majors had a good sense of discourse in that they were familiar with discourse-based reading strategies. Table 4 shows that a significant difference only appears in Item 13 ( $t = .045, p < .05$ ). This suggested that, on average, English majors were more inclined to grasp the main idea by analyzing the text structure compared to non-English majors. However, significant difference between English majors and non-English majors were not found in any other item, suggesting that English majors and non-English majors were similar in terms of their awareness of coherence and cohesion, and the application of reading strategies related to context and background information.

In sum, non-English majors' discourse awareness was poorer than English majors in the sense that they used reading strategies about structure of discourse less often.

#### 4.2 Analysis of Follow-Up Questionnaire

Given that non-English majors applied reading strategies related to structure of discourse less often based on the data from the main questionnaire, the follow-up research aimed to understand the potential reasons: whether it was due to students' ignorance of structure of discourse or due to their disbelief in the effectiveness of these strategies.

The majority of participants agreed that analyzing the text structure helped them understand the main idea (26.92% chose "Totally agree", 57.69% "Agree", and 15.38% "Neutral") while no participants thought it did not help at all. However, 61.54% of participants were not sure whether they knew how to analyze the text structure, and 11.54% did not believe that they were able to detect the structural features. That is to say, what stopped these students from using discourse structure reading strategies was their lack of knowledge of these reading strategies, not disbelief in their effectiveness. When asked about what strategies to use, 84.62% would look for the thesis statement and topic sentences, while 53.85% would identify the genre of the text. However, only 34.62% students tried to identify the organizing pattern of the text.

As for when they analyzed the text structure, 7 participants out of 26 said they would undertake the analysis when they could not make sense of the main idea, 5 participants when they needed to answer questions about the structure, and 4 participants when they tried to identify the genre of the text.

In summary, students considered it important to analyze the structure of discourse to understand the main idea, but they lacked specific knowledge of the strategies. For example, some of them never tried

to identify the organizing pattern of the text.

#### *4.3 Pedagogical Implications*

This research has found that, in general, Chinese university students are familiar with reading strategies based on discourse analysis. English-majors only outperform non-English majors when it comes to analyzing the structure of discourse. Thus, focus should be placed on strategies about the structure of discourse rather than teaching every aspect of discourse analysis in the non-English major reading teaching.

Identifying the organizing pattern of the passage is worthwhile because “some patterns occur frequently”, readers can “predict the likely values of sentence and interpret difficult ones”, and they can “follow the argument better, read more selectively and locate more readily information needed for a specific purpose” (Nuttall, 2002, p. 106). Both organizing patterns at the paragraph level and above paragraph level should be addressed in teaching.

Tompkins (1998) suggests the following steps to teach text structures: (1) introduce an organizing pattern and explain the signal words and phrases; (2) give students opportunities to analyze the text and illustrate its organizing pattern with graphic organizers; (3) ask students to write paragraphs by using each organizing pattern.

Nuttall (2002) suggests the use of text diagrams because it helps the students “by setting out the relationships between parts of the text [...] and showing what each part contributes to the whole” (p. 109). This method can not only demonstrate how different ideas work together with coherence to express the main idea, but also help students recognize different organizing patterns (such as sequence, narration, exposition, cause-effect, etc.).

Silberstein (2002) designs a variety of activities on different organizing patterns. For example, students “can be asked to complete a timeline or otherwise place events in sequence, or they can be asked to correct an incorrect sequence” when they learn the chronological order. Students may be asked to “complete charts, outlines, or diagrams, or to create their own semantic maps” when the teacher explicates classification (p. 56).

Certainly, the structure of discourse includes organizing ideas, organizing a paragraph and organizing an essay. Ting (2004) explicates that traditional rhetorical patterns such as definition, description, classification, comparison and contrast are basic ways to organize ideas. When an author organizes a paragraph, the pattern of TRIT is used for point development and the text structure. “T” stands for the topic sentence, “R” for refining the topic, “I” for illustration, and “T” means returning to the topic. When the underlying organization are at the essay level, a usual pattern like “introduction-body-conclusion” will be followed. Therefore, EFL teachers in China can highlight the language knowledge of how to organize ideas, a paragraph and an essay when they teach reading strategies about the structure of discourse, so that EFL learners are acquainted with the underlying organization structures at different linguistic levels.

#### 4.4 Limitations

Although the research validity was strong and the methods successfully gave insights into the research questions, there were some weaknesses to address. First of all, the snowball sampling method was less reliable than probability sampling technique to avoid subjective bias, but the researcher tried to overcome the limitation by covering students from different majors and grades. Secondly, due to the small number of English majors at this university, the ratio of English major to non-English major participants failed to reach 1 to 1, which might have an impact on some significant data. Finally, the sampling size of the follow-up questionnaire was not large enough. The result will have a better statistical support with more participants involved.

#### 5. Conclusion

The current study aimed to investigate the focus of discourse-based English reading teaching and find out the difference of pedagogical implications between English majors and non-English majors in Chinese universities. While Chinese university students have a good sense of discourse in English reading, non-English majors are weaker in applying discourse structure reading strategies compared to English majors, the likely reason being that they do not have sufficient knowledge in this area. The research findings shed light on the future teaching practice, indicating that non-English majors should learn more about the organizing patterns of the passage if they want to grasp the main idea of the text effectively and improve their reading skills in the long run. When the pedagogical practice focuses more on the text structure, non-English major students will be guided to view a passage as a meaningful whole and comprehend it by discourse analysis. With the explicit discourse-based instruction and the reading strategy practice, non-English major students will improve their reading competency substantially.

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## Appendix A

### Main Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to find out university students' attitudes toward English reading and the strategies they use while reading. There is no such thing as right or wrong in terms of your answers. Your answers play an important role in the research, so please be as accurate as possible when answering the following questions. All the information will be kept confidential and only be used for the research.

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Major: \_\_\_\_\_

Years of Learning English: \_\_\_\_\_

(Please check the number that best describes your opinion. The number represents different degree of agreement)

1	2	3	4	5
Totally Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Totally Agree

Question	Opinion				
1. I like English reading when I learn English.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I think acquiring a large vocabulary and grammatical rules makes me understand English passages automatically.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I think making sense of each sentence makes me understand the main idea of English passages automatically.	1	2	3	4	5

4. I think I need to use different reading strategies for different genres of English passages.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I think making sense of the main idea makes me understand the author's writing purpose automatically.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I will predict the main idea based on the title in English reading.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I will use the background knowledge to help understand the main idea in English reading.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I will infer the meaning of new words by referring to the context in English reading.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I will figure out the relationship between the pronoun and the word it replaces in English reading.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I will pay attention to the coherence of words, such as repetitions, synonyms and antonyms in English reading.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I will analyze the relationship between sentences to help understand the main idea in English reading.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I will use the conjunctions and other cohesive devices to understand the main idea in English reading.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I will analyze the structure of the passage to help understand the main idea in English reading.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I will summarize the main idea of the passage after English reading.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I will analyze the author's writing purpose after English reading.	1	2	3	4	5

## Appendix B

### Follow-Up Questionnaire

This questionnaire is a follow-up survey, which is designed to find out university students' English reading strategies related to the structure of the passage. There is no such thing as right or wrong in terms of your answers. Your answers play an important role in the research, so please be as accurate as possible when answering the following questions. All the information will be kept confidential and only be used for the research.

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Major: \_\_\_\_\_

Years of Learning English: \_\_\_\_\_

1. In the previous questionnaire, what is your answer to Item #13 "I will analyze the structure of the text to help understand the main idea in English reading"?

A. Totally disagree    B. Disagree    C. Neutral    D. Agree    E. Totally agree

2. Based on your understanding, what is "the structure of the text"?

A. The genre of the text (such as narration, exposition, classification, argumentation, etc.)

B. The organizing pattern of the text (such as sequence, compare and contrast, cause and effect, problem and solution, etc.)

C. Something else

3. What kinds of strategies do you use in English reading (You can choose more than one strategy)?
- A. Identify the genre of the text
  - B. Identify the organizing pattern of the text
  - C. Find out the thesis statement
  - D. Find out the topic sentence of each paragraph
  - E. Pay attention to the structure of sentences, and analyze “participants”, “process” and “environmental factors”
  - F. Pay attention to the initial information of each sentence
4. What is your opinion of the statement “I know how to analyze the structure of the text”?
- A. Totally disagree   B. Disagree   C. Neutral   D. Agree   E. Totally agree
5. What is your opinion of the statement “I think analyzing the structure of the text helps me understand the main idea”?
- A. Totally disagree   B. Disagree   C. Neutral   D. Agree   E. Totally agree
6. Based on your English reading experience, in what situation, will you analyze the structure of the text?
-