J. Basic. Appl. Sci. Res., 2(10)10517-10522, 2012

ISSN 2090-4304
Journal of Basic and Applied Scientific Research
www.textroad.com

Writer-Reader Discourse Transactions and Implications for a Pedagogy of Reading

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ABSTRACT

Reading consists of two major indispensable elements: a reader and a text. A third element is also crucial and influential; that is, the writer, in that the reader should know why and how messages in writer's head are turned into texts. These texts are produced or operated upon by the reader in an interaction of, incontrovertibly, the reader and the text and, equally plausibly, the reader and the writer. Gaining insight into the nature of textualization process, how it works or operates and, also, knowing how writer-discourse production process and reader-discourse derivation process work can be of great help for an English teacher to tackle his or her profession with much ease and comfort. The aim of this paper is accordingly to highlight the interrelationships between these variables in an attempt to assist EFL teachers in making the process of text comprehension a simpler task for their clients.

KEY WORDS: writer-discourse production; reader-discourse derivation; textualization process; text comprehension

INTRODUCTION

A written text is characterized as a partial record of a discourse performed by the writer on behalf of or in the interest of a supposed reader. "This enactment (i.e. performance) involves the use of tactical and strategic procedures to convey a scheme or pattern of information which is a projection of the writer's world. His purpose is to induce the reader to recognize his territorial claim" [1: 90].

If the actual reader is ready to play the role the writer had thrown to him, then he will attempt to discover the underlying discourse from available textual clues. Such being the case, reading will be an act of "submission". In other words, the reader, being cognizant of writer's higher status or authority and yearning to gain access to the information given, will adjust his own frames of reference to accommodate it. He will, then, permit himself to be led by the writer and be satisfied to keep to the course that has been sketched or plotted for him.

But the reader may not be willing to surrender to writer's control in his way; he may not want, or may not be able, to adjust his own frames of reference to accommodate the writer's conceptual scheme. And he is not forced to do so either. Widdowson argues by stating that, he is also free to disregard the discourse that the writer has enacted on his behalf [1]. Instead of adjusting his scheme of things to accommodate that of the writer, he can project his own scheme on what he reads and reverses the direction of accommodation so that the text is adjusted to suit the patterns of his own references. Such being the case, reading is an act not of submission but of "assertion".

The difference between submissive and assertive engagement can be related to Piaget's distinction between accommodation and assimilation [2]. Submission typically occurs when there is considerable disparity between the schematic knowledge of interlocutors and when the addressee is impelled for one reason or another to modify the structure of his knowledge so as to accommodate that of the text producer.

In either case, a sort of danger threatens the process of meaning negotiation. If he is too assertive, there is a danger that he may distort or make the writer's intention sound unnatural and prevent himself from gaining access to new knowledge and experience. If he is too submissive, on the other hand, there is a danger of accumulating information without subjecting it to the critical analysis indispensable to incorporate into the schematic structure of existing knowledge. In both cases, reading is deprived of its essential purpose - communication. "So, it is that the difficulties of reading, unlike those of conversation, have to do less with the negotiation of constraints than with the use of freedom" [1: 94].

2. The text

Whether reading is regarded as a product or a process, the reader must get involved with the text. Special attention has been paid to those features of text that pose difficulty to readers. The study of text readability has a strong history. An area pertinent to readability is that of simplification. "If a text is found not to be readable,

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attempts may be made to alter it in order to make it more readable, or simpler" [3: 21]. However, simplification is not so easy as it was traditionally assumed. Simplification is not without its hazards. Rendering a text syntactically simpler may give rise to the distortion of the message or indeed, it may adversely affect other aspects of the text [3]. "Simplification can be seen as a process in which the teacher or his agent consciously adjusts the language presented to the learner" [3: 182]. In the case of reading materials, simplification refers to the selection of a restricted set of features from the full range of language resources for the sake of pedagogic efficiency. The code is not affected or subjected to change, nor are the learners presented with a simpler language system rather with a limited sample of full system.

Concerning the type of relationship that holds between simplification and authenticity Lautamatti [1978, in 3] argues that the use of simplified texts in the teaching of foreign language reading comprehension servers as a ladder towards firstly less simplified and finally authentic texts [4, 5, 6, 7]. Implicit in Widdowson's and others' remarks is the assumption that they view simplification and authenticity as extremes of the same spectrum and that simplification is "a pedagogic device and that, therefore, what is authentic is what is not simplified and what is not pedagogic" [Davies, 1984, in 3: 185].

Widdowson further argues that authenticity is procured when the reader grapples with the intention of text encoder by reference to a set of shared conventions [4]. "It is here that we look to the creative impulse of the reader who must actively involve himself, cooperate with writer and come to a comprehension of a text that was a moment before too difficult for him" [Davies, ibid in 3: 180]. Also, Lotfipour [8] holding the same view as that of Tommola [9] uses the term "modification" instead in reference to simplification and argues that the modification spoils the authenticity, and, we, as teachers, should keep the text intact, nor should we affect the code [4, 10, 11] That is, the teacher's task while holding a balance between simplification and authenticity of reading materials is to present restricted sample of the full system rather than the language system in its entirety.

Within the concept of simplification, two approaches can be distinguished: one can concentrate on simplifying the text itself; this, for example, can be done by eliminating features which pose difficulty to one's target students. Alternatively, by making the text more accessible by bringing into focus "back-up devices" [Williams et al, in 3: 211]. Here, by back-up devices, Williams et al mean making use of rhetorical clues, identifying roots, and affixes, and making inferences, etc. They argue that the insertion of such devices in a text has advantages over an exclusive dependence on text simplification: "firstly, it seems to give more acknowledgements to the learning aspects of the learning situation, e.g. that students need to increase their vocabulary and must be exposed to unfamiliar items" [3: 211]. A second possible advantage is that, since the texts used can be less simplified and more authentic, the translation from adapted to non-adapted texts may be made easier.

3. The writer

In spoken conversation, where there is a face-to-face conveyance of meaning through bilateral and reciprocal exchanges, the interaction is obvious. It is evident that the interactants do not knit their meanings together with careful precision or subject every utterance to analytic scrutiny. They rely on what Grice calls the co-operative principle (with the maxims of quantity of information, quality of information, relevance and clarity) and assume that some satisfactory agreement as to what is meant will emerge as the discourse progresses [12]. Widdowson elaborating on the differences between these two modes of interaction (i.e. written vs. spoken) remarks that encoding is a matter of supplying directions and decoding a matter of tracing them [4]. In the latter (spoken discourse) which is by nature an interaction of a reciprocal kind, such directions do not need to be carefully specified by each interlocutor. They can be worked out co-operatively between them as the interaction proceeds.

Texts are observable or noticeable tracks or evidence of the process, though not itself subject to direct observation, of mediating or bringing about a message. In conversation, these tracks are typically incomplete and last for a short while and fade away as soon as they are produced to serve their immediate discourse purpose. They can be written down or preserved for later use. Written text, on the other hand, is not shaped with the reader's contribution, and interpreted on-line in this way. It is usually shaped and recorded one-sidedly, by the writer, the sole begetter of text, the sole enactor of the whole intended message. The text is, then, received and construed as a separate process. The mediation is, thus, delayed and moved from its right place, and it is evident that it will widen the convergence gap between intention and interpretation.

Written discourse is produced and received in detachment from an immediate context of utterance and this can easily mislead us into regarding it as a radically different mode of communication from conversation. The relevant question which needs to be posed here is how above cited co-operative principles work in written, non-reciprocal discourse. Widdowson answers this question by claiming that as I write I take on the parts of both interlocutors (the addresser and the addressee) [4]. Also, the reader, from the decoding point of view, takes on the dual part of addresser and addressee, and rebuilds the dialogue. Contact between the encoder and decoder is established to the extent that the latter's possible reactions have been foreseen.

The writer has something to impart and must assess what extra information he needs to put at his reader's disposal so as to facilitate the negotiation of meaning. During his presentation, he shifts perspectives and calculates the second person's (i.e. the supposed reader) response and adjusts the development of his discourse

accordingly. So, the writer "conducts a covert interaction to establish a convergence of frames of reference so that the information he wishes to convey is made accessible to his supposed reader" [11: 89; see also 10, 13, 14, 15]. In doing so, the writer resorts to the kind of tactical procedures whereby he foresees the immediate reactions of the supposed second person addressee (i.e. the reader) and so he gives shape to further growth or linearly organized development of the discourse. He, also, touches upon procedures of a more strategic kind to highlight or foreground the main points of his presentation and to distinguish them from peripheral ones – those intended to serve an enabling function.

Other than those retrospective procedures for formulating, the writer, also, resorts to prospective procedures to give pre-formulations of what he wants to say: e.g. there are three points I wish to make: first… second… third… the purpose of this paper is… . "Such devices make explicit in advance the hierarchical structure of the discourse and compensate for the absence immediate feedback which in conversation allows for the structure to be monitored into shape through reciprocal interaction" [11: 89].

4. Writer-discourse process

By this, it is meant how, in written discourse, the writer gets his propositional meaning across, and how the reader takes it. The problem for the writer is that he has to impart his propositions while being deprived of the benefit of overt interaction which makes it feasible for interlocutors in this particular case, conversationalists, to negotiate meanings in face-to-face confrontation. This implies that the writer has to anticipate possible reactions by performing or enacting the dual role of both first and second person participants. He is engaged in covert rather than in overt interaction. All the time he must provide for the possible lack of conveyance of shared knowledge: of the world, of social conventions, of the language itself. So, the propositional content he wants to transmit is elaborated to serve what the writer judges to be an effective communicative interaction [11].

It is worth noting that this interactive attempt does not only shoulder the role of easing the transmission of planned propositions, it also generates new conceptual connections not originally thought of. The writer, of course, typically jots down the first person participant's contribution to this interaction. This partial record of the discourse is written text. The writer's recording of discourse as text and the reader's derivation of discourse from text can be related to the processes of "expansion" and "reduction" respectively [8; 16, 17]. To use Widdowson's terms, the writer in his attempts to create a text follows an "elaborative" course and the reader to derive meaning follows a "reductive" course [11]. And these processes can, in their turn, conform with two chief language functions, i.e. conceptual and communicative respectively.

Widdowson contends that the narrower the convergence of conceptual worlds between the writer and the reader, the more diminutive the communicative effort called for, and the more formidable the task of the analyst in textualizing the discourse to make it interpretable [11]. The writer, in written discourse relies heavily on expansion procedures to accompany his conceptual meanings with the required or essential communicative conveyance since he is working or enacting under conditions of at the zero end or at the extreme end of co-operative continuum. These conditions of non-reciprocal interaction lead to a conveyance of participant's and analyst's perspective. The writer is a participant in that he is enacting a discourse with an assumed and absent interlocutor but he is at the same time detached from immediate involvement and so he can, in the third person analyst fashion, put himself at a distance from the interaction [11].

Written discourse operates by means of the same basic interactive procedures as characterize spoken conversation but the absence of reciprocity calls for a different mode of exploitation. Another difficulty is that when people interact, they do not only make use of linguistic elements: they employ not only language but also paralanguage – tones of voice, varying stress, pauses and so on, facial expression and gestures are the frequent accompanying part of the message they intend to convey. "In written communication, too, how a text is given a particular shape by choice of typeface or its arrangement on a page, may suggest significance over and above what it signifies linguistically" [7: 8].

It is the non-existence of conformity between text and discourse that renders communication so inexact or vague and at the same time so fascinating. Life would somewhat be more comfortable if we could pinpoint things more exactly, if all we were to do to convey was to put together linguistic forms of fixed meaning and send them out for decoding at the receiving extreme. A text would, then, communicate its own meaning, regardless of what the context or purpose of its production would be. But when we use language, we do not just attend to the meanings that are offered in it, we make use of them as possible materials for making meaning of our own. The encoded meanings are semantic meanings. "In using a language we not only put this knowledge on display but also act upon it as appropriate to our communicative intentions: in other words, we always make this semantic meaning serve a pragmatic purpose" [7: 8]. Unlike spoken text in which you have to rely on some third-person intervention to record it, written text is participant-created, self-inscribed, as a direct record of the discourse intentions of a first-person party. The text is there at hand, firmly established, continuous, well-organized, fixed on a page or on a screen. But these very characteristics of the textual record can give us the wrong impression that its relationship with the discourse that creates or causes it is comparatively unproblematic, and we are drawn into misconception that meaning is inscribed in the text itself, and that what the writer wants to convey can be obtained or concluded directly from textual material.

Written text, indeed, as different from the written representation or, better to say, textual record of spoken text, creates even greater problems of construing, for while textual record of spoken text records, though incompletely, the discourse of both interlocutors, the latter (i.e. written text) records the contribution of the first party, who can only account for second-person reaction by proxy. And contrary to the spoken conversation, in written text, there is no possibility of on-line negotiation to enable the two parties to come closer to a mutual understanding. In this regard, fixity of the text disguises an intrinsic instability of meaning.

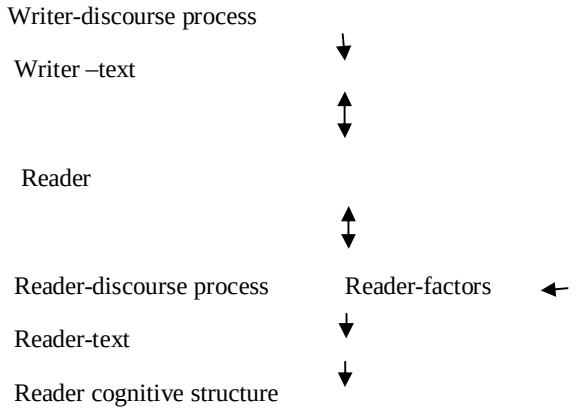
It is a widely held view that spoken language is formless and featureless. Halliday [18: 76] states that "spontaneous speech is unlike written text. It contains many mistakes, sentences are brief and indeed the whole fabric of verbal expression is riddled with hesitation and silence". McRoberts [1981, cited in 18: 77] argues that "a sample of speech is formless, tentative, and spur-of-the-moment. Yet, although it looks shabby in printed form, the original conversation would have seemed quite sensible to the participants". Halliday while dismissing the aforementioned remarks by McRoberts as unfounded argues, "Speech is, by its nature, low in content – in the special sense of lexical density, but it is not low in content in the general sense of lacking information; and it is certainly not unstructured and superficial" [18: 77].

Turning back to the nature of reading, it can be said that the writer is involved in a process of discourse enactment whereby conceptual content is expanded for conveyance and this discourse process is partially recorded as a textual product. The reader reconverts this product into a process and so derives a discourse from text which is called reader-discourse process. This discourse, however, is reduced and this reduction yields not the underlying macro-structure of the writer's original formulation but whatever conceptual content corresponds with the reader's state of knowledge and his purpose in reading. More precisely, "in writing the expansion provides the means whereby the conceptual function can come to terms with the communicative, and in reading reduction provides the means whereby the communicative function can come to terms with the conceptual" [11: 79].

Limitations of reader's cognitive ability and attention and the writer's cognizance of these restrictions can be viewed as prospective factors affecting writer-discourse production process. The writer, to obviate this problem, employs certain elaborations or discoursal strategies to promote effective information processing and the interpretation and comprehension of the intended message by the reader. As the textualization process takes shape, the writer, to overcome the formerly stated problem (i.e. not to sound over-informative for those readers with possibly higher than presumed level of background knowledge on the part of text-producer), also touches upon certain types of "hedges" (Lakoff, 1972) such as "of course", "it should be emphasized that", "again", etc. with the discoursal function of implying "I know that you know, but..." [8: 28].

5. Nature of reading comprehension

The writer-discourse is presented to the reader in the form of writer-text. Seeded into this text are indices by the writer to activate reader-discourse and set it in motion with the involvement of reader-factors (i.e. reader's background knowledge, knowledge of the world, purpose, motivation, interest, knowledge of subject matter, etc.). The message negotiated in the process of reader-discourse is presented through the reader-text to the reader's cognitive structure. The above discussion can diagrammatically be shown as follows:



[adopted from 8: 28]

"The main difference between the writer discourse/text and reader-discourse/text is that the former is elaborative while the latter is reductive" [8: 29]. This difference itself arises from the principle of establishing a balance between the degree of elaboration or to use Widdowson's term "expansion" required and the extent of communal knowledge assumed to exist at any moment between the interlocutors, in this case, between the writer and the reader [1].

Due to maximum level of communal knowledge (in the case of reader-discourse/text), where the addressor and addressee are identical, not only is no elaboration required but also elaborations by the writer are reduced to a minimum. That is why Lotfipour [8: 29] argues that "the reductive process of reading comprehension proceeds in an opposite direction to the elaborative process of writing, reducing the hierarchically added elaborations to the discoursal themes and then, moving upwards in the hierarchy towards the higher nodes. In this way, the reader builds up what we may call the macro-structure of the discourse or the reader-text."

If we characterize the writer-text, it becomes evident that it consists of a set of hierarchically organized theme-rheme units. Each of these units upon its reception by the reader, activates a comprehension cycle. Thus, "reading comprehension process … consists of a set of hierarchically organized comprehension cycles … the comprehension hierarchy proceeds from micro themes towards the higher nodes – macro themes, but the writer-discourse … from the higher nodes to lower and micro themes" [8: 30].

The most important factor, as Widdowson [1, 4] argues, which gives impetus to the ever-increasing volume of writer-discourse production process, is the reader's cognitive limitation which in turn gives rise to the employment of certain discoursal strategies of "reiterations" by the writer of the text whereby enhances the reader's memory capacity. Likewise, Kintch and van Dijk state that the more a concept and the relevant frame is activated in the reader's working memory (short-term memory) for its involvement in interaction with other concepts or frames, the more it is attended to and the more probable its inclusion would be in the macro-structure of the reader-text [19].

Reiterations are specific discoursal strategies employed by the writer for the activation of relevant frames and thereby to ensure its integration with the already existing frames in the reader's cognitive structure. It is due to the employment of these extra strategies by the writer that the discourse volume increases, i.e. the topic is fully elaborated. "By employing reiteration strategies, the writer aims to activate extra comprehension cycles in the reader-discourse process and to ensure the consolidation and integration of certain elements of the negotiated message into reader's cognitive structure [8: 33]. Reiterations, thus, are employed to ensure longer retention of certain elements of the negotiated message in the reader's cognitive structure. But, it should be underscored that this retention is mainly a short-term one and the writer's reiteration strategies do not guarantee the long-term retention of all aspects of the message by all readers. Extra retentions are, thus, needed to guarantee a long-term retention of the message or certain aspects of the message by the reader. As an example of these extra reiterations, as Chastain argues, is "re-reading" or "rehearsing" [20].

6. Pedagofical implications

Since the writer's awareness of the assumed reader's schemata or background knowledge, with whom he carries a covert interaction, is imperfect, to make up for this deficiency, the writer employs certain strategic procedures such as reiterations and retrospective strategies to bring into light the main points of his message by summarizing or recapitulating aforementioned propositions or through prospective ones to highlight in advance the hierarchical structure of his discourse being shaped. Gaining insight into the nature of reading in general and the strategies the text begetter employs to impart his conceptual meaning in particular and knowing how the reader moves in reverse direction compared to the writer to derive meaning from this interactive process can be analogous to the operation of an apparatus. The more acquainted with the technicality of the apparatus in question, the more he or she is in a position to operate it. The same holds true with respect to the language learner or user. It is evident that teacher's cognizance of these deliberately cultivated discoursal strategies into the writer-text for the activation of extra comprehension cycles would be of great worth to help the learners to take increasingly a clear picture of the formerly blurred concept or message.

Discourse view of language reversed the trend of thought once prescribed by behaviorists. It endorses not the bottom-up or phonics approach, but rather the top-down or psycholinguistic approach to language teaching in which case the obtained or derived meaning is the product of learners' interaction with text. As Cambourn argues, it is the interaction that takes place between the text processor and the text which is vital to the process of meaning decoding [21]. In discourse view, the underlying assumption is that comprehension resides primarily in the reader's background knowledge base not in the text itself. The assumption is that the text per se does not have any meaning but potential for meaning which should be deciphered with the intervention of many factors of which knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is only one. Within this framework, learners' schematic knowledge concerning the subject or issue under investigation and their awareness of cohesive ties and cohesion itself and many other factors should form the focus of attention. Because the assumption implicit in this view of language is that new knowledge can be coherently processed in relation to ever-existing knowledge frameworks, and that the efficient reader should activate the necessary frameworks to assist in decoding the text being read.

Recently, success or failure in an attempt to recreate meaning from a written text is ascribed to the role the ever-increasing background knowledge is assumed to serve. If the reader has the necessary background knowledge, the writer's message will effortlessly be unlocked. Being devoid of such schemata, the reader will "bog down in the mud" and will fail to accommodate even explicitly stated propositions to their own pre-existing knowledge of structures. "The more we, as readers, are locked into the world of the text, the easier it is to absorb new information" [22: 169]. In light of above reasoning, in an attempt to decipher the writer's

message, this responsibility of lending learners a hand to gain access to the relevant and necessary background knowledge base should be shouldered by the teacher.

One must, in the teaching of reading and writing, make one's learners realize the essentially inaccurate character of communication through natural language. Most of our teaching seems to develop an understanding in learners to ensure that the exact meanings can, indeed, be entirely recoverable or accessible from texts, that texts will provide or yield their total content if they are subjected to thorough and detailed scrutiny. We, thus, hinder a normal use of natural language and refrain them from gaining access to (or better to say, disown) their own conceptual world which per se guarantees that reading will, in any really significant sense, be meaningful. Besides, by no account does the detachment of written discourse render it any less interactive as a mode of communicating [4].

7. Conclusion

In a nutshell, writer-discourse production process, unlike reader-discourse production process which is reduction-oriented in nature**,** is elaboration-oriented whereby the writer by taking the dual roles of both the addresser and addressee, and, indeed, by the vicarious assumption of the second party's role envisages the possible reactions of the supposed reader and conducts a covert interaction with him or her. The writer is involved in a process of discourse enactment whereby conceptual content is expanded for conveyance. To do so, the writer recourses to the kind of tactical procedures or procedures of a more strategic kind to shape or render his discourse into a text. The reader, on the other hand, reconverts the product into a process and so derives a discourse from it. The reductive nature of reading unlike elaborative process of writing entails hierarchically added elaborations to be reduced to the discoursal themes, and in this way, the reader builds the macro-structure of the discourse or the reader-text.

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