

## **A Didactic Intervention On Written Discourse And Rhetorical Patterns**

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### **Abstract**

Reading comprehension skills in EFL is vital for university students. Particularly, being aware of the writer's intention by means of discourse patterns allows students to interact with the written text. Therefore, this research paper examines the implementation of a Discourse Analysis perspective in an Intermediate general EFL lesson aimed to enhance both critical thinking and reading skills by identifying the use of language patterns in written texts. 20 students from an Upper-Intermediate English course that studies a BA in English at a public University situated in the center of the state of Veracruz Mexico were the participants. Qualitative classroom research approach was chosen to implement a didactic intervention aimed at enhancing students communicative and reflective skills on the impact that social media has had on their lives. Results revealed that students were able to identify the meaning, and the relationship discourse markers establish between the written ideas and the meaning the writer wants to transmit. Particularly, students were able to reflect on the implications of social media use on communication, information access, marketing, and self-perception of its users. The didactic implications of the lesson focused on discourse patterns use indicate that such teaching perspective can significantly improve students' critical thinking and communicative abilities. Therefore, it can be considered this lesson as an innovative proposal for enhancing the development of communicative skills in EFL students.

**Keywords:** *Critical Thinking Skills, Discourse Analysis, Discourse Patterns, Lesson Plan, Reading Skill.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Developing the reading skill at higher education is essential for students' academic achievement. Specifically, at that educative level, students are required to disseminate their knowledge through a written production (Raoufi et al., 2017). Furthermore, through written text university students show their ability to analyze, relate and substantiate their own perspectives, and defend their position by integrating points of view that are different or opposed to those they support (Farlora, 2015; Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2014; Rayas & Méndez, 2017). In sum, students who develop a good writing ability would "attain professional development in their academic areas" (Raoufi et al., 2017, p.192).

One concern of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom is to help students to develop their reading skills. Particularly, in the process of teaching reading, there exists two well-known approaches, named product-oriented and process-oriented. Theory about teaching reading has stated that since the decade of 1980's process approach has been employed for reading teachers. Such approach emphasizes the composing process and its related stages (Rogers, 2012). Within it, students are guided through a series of pre-reading activities such as identifying main ideas, comprehending, discussion, and revising so that students can develop their linguistic skills (Feez, 2002; Muncie, 2002). In the 1990's there was a shift towards a purpose-reading orientation named genre approach. It emphasizes the analysis of the contextual situation in which a written text is developed (Atkinson, 2003; Hyland, 2007; Paltridge, 2007). Under this approach, students are expected to be aware of reoccurring textural structures, which in turn advocates for the discourse conventions of a specific context (Christie, 1999).

Text structures are organizational assemblies that are used within paragraphs or longer texts. They are consistent with a genre and a purpose. Furthermore, text structures are conceived as constituting principles of texts through which a writer embeds an underlying representation of their beliefs (Hess, 2006). Those beliefs are constructed from information gathered from different sources. Then, the way in which each idea is written forms a textual structure (Ahn, 2012; Sanders & Schilperoord, 2006; Spivey, 1997). Generally speaking, there are ten types of textual structures. These are: process, chronology, description, definition, compare-contrast, cause-effect, problem-solution, proposition-support, judgment, and inductive-deductive structure (Hess, 2006).

Reading a text with a good structure implies knowing the so-called rhetorical relations. They are discourse patterns that characterize the coherence of a text. Those patterns may explain, narrate, contrast, express a result, or make evident a parallelism between ideas (Jasinskaja & Karagjosova, 2020; Spivey, 1997). The relations are evident between adjacent text chunks (i.e. clauses) up to the entire text. Additionally, each clause has a specific function, a plausible reason for its presence. In other words, the rhetorical structure specifies the pragmatic function that one chunk fulfills in relation to another; that is the reason why they are also known as relational speech acts (Ruffino, 2022).

The term relational speech acts are based on John Searle's speech act theory. This theory studies the way words are used to present information, as well as to perform actions (Kemmerling 2002). Aspects of this theory are adequate to be employed when teaching reading English as a Foreign Language (EFL). For instance, rhetorical devices related to discourse-knowledge integration, monitoring, and inter/intra-referential processes (García et al., 2018). Particularly, the analysis of discourse patterns and regularities encourages learners to recognize and understand recurring linguistic features, which enable them to comprehend and produce more natural language (Chambers, 2007). Furthermore, the exploration of context, power, and ideology in discourse promotes critical language awareness, helping learners determine how these factors influence language use and interpretation. By recognizing the dynamic nature of language and discourse through the identification of rhetorical choices that writers make in their text, learners can adapt their language skills to various communicative situations (Howard & Jamieson, 2021).

## RESEARCH METHODS

The approach adopted for developing this research was qualitative, especially classroom research. Classroom research is an umbrella term to name a variety of systematic intentional inquiry about classroom language learning mainly developed by teachers (Allright, 1983). Classroom research begins with noticing a difficult aspect of language learning. Then, such problematic issue leads to formulating specific questions. That question was how students can develop both critical thinking and reading skills, particularly by identifying language patterns. Later, it is planned the actions to follow, gather the data, reflect on data meaning, and decide again what actions to develop (Koshy, 2010). In this article, it is only reported the first cycle of classroom research.

The participants of this study were a group of 20 students from fifth semester of a BA in English Language in the state of Veracruz, Mexico. This BA offers courses devoted to areas such as English language proficiency, didactics, translation, and philology. However, the focus was on the fifth course those students took: Upper-Intermediate English. The aim of this course is that students develop communicative skills by participating in familiar situations that require to

express their opinions about familiar topics and specialized ones, by employing sophisticated lexic resources (Universidad Veracruzana, 2015).

In this sense, it was the researchers' main concern to inquire how those students identify language patterns in daily-life texts and how they can use for reading their own texts. Therefore, it was designing a lesson plan that asks students to discuss and provide arguments on the impact that social media has had on their lives. The specific objectives were that students identify and summarize the main points of a reading passage about the impact of social media on society by appealing to the meaning and function of different discourse markers. Information was gathered by students' responses to discussion questions through which they discuss their concerns about social media by utilizing discourse markers efficiently.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

During the design phase of the lesson, particular attention was given to key elements of Discourse Analysis (DA) such as textual patterns in discourse, the Problem-Solution and General-Specific patterns, as well as exploring signaling and discourse organizers. The theoretical aspects of DA in this context aimed at analyzing written discourse concerning these patterns and rhetorical structures. Moreover, it sought to identify discourse organizers and signals within a given written text. Within a 50-minute timeframe, the lesson implemented the core thesis of this inquiry: the incorporation of DA principles into teaching methodologies significantly improves students' critical thinking and communicative abilities.

The selection of materials for the lesson was meticulously undertaken, guided by a comprehensive list of criteria. It was found a balance between digital and printed materials, ensuring alignment with the class objectives, as well as catering to the different students' learning styles. Digital materials, found on social media platforms and online forums, were chosen to mirror real-world language use. Simultaneously, traditional print materials were incorporated to honor the importance of foundational linguistic structures and to accommodate various learning preferences among the students. This deliberate material selection process aligns with the overarching goal of this study, and the authentic material presented in DA principles (Jones, 2022). Nevertheless, it resonates with the dynamic and varied language landscapes encountered by English learners in today's interconnected world.

In the lead-in stage, the teacher initiated a discussion about social media, as a way to introduce the context and engage in the classroom. Students were prompted with questions to gauge their preferences, frequency, and perceived impacts of social media. This contextualization aimed to familiarize students with the topic, laying the groundwork for subsequent discourse analysis activities. As observed, students progressively increased participation, underscoring the effectiveness of contextualization in fostering comfort and expression as Spindler and Spindler (2014) pointed out.

Taking into account the Cognitive Load Theory (Bartlett, 1995; Yeh et al., 2012), the presentation stage served not only to set the context but also to activate students' prior knowledge. This strategic approach aligned with similar studies emphasizing the importance of pre-existing cognitive structures in the learning process and the activation of schemata (Sweller, 1988; McCarthy, 1991). As observed, the students increased participation underscored the effectiveness of contextualization in fostering comfort and expression, aligning with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where it is mentioned scaffolding as a way to support learners in reaching a higher level of understanding (Vygotsky, 1978).

The second activity involved a True or False exercise based on a given text. First of all, learners were required to read the statement and decide on their own which were True or False

to be later discussed with their peers. Then, learners read the text to check their answers. After that, they identified and highlighted the discourse markers. Students were provided with a paper sheet with the exercise and text. They were also instructed on how they were going to solve the exercise and that they would work in pairs. While students were working together, the teacher walked around their tables to provide instrumental scaffolding. In this way, the teacher could help students to find or develop strategies towards the solutions (Jong, 2019). Through small language excerpts, learners were expected to gain awareness of the significance of discourse markers, contributing to the overall goal of enhancing their communicative skills, particularly their thinking skills.

In the text, learners were instructed to identify and highlight discourse markers, aligning with previous research on the significance of such in reading comprehension. This also confirms the prevailing theory that learners acquire more effectively by discovering language patterns on their own according to the Noticing Hypothesis and Krashen's theories of Second Language Acquisition (Schmith, 2010). The teacher's strategic use of scaffolding, as mentioned by Jong et al (2019), exemplified the importance of guided assistance to facilitate independent problem-solving skills. This echoes the work of Vygotsky (1978), who considered social interaction and collaboration as a crucial role in learning a language and in cognitive development in general.

In the third exercise, students were tasked with discussing challenging vocabulary and reviewing and justifying the true and false statements as a class. This activity served as a way of establishing relationships within a text for encouraging oral expression rooted in critical thinking. The subtle incorporation of discourse markers into these discussions aimed to foster their correct usage without overtly signaling this as the primary objective of the lesson. As the discussion unfolded, the Problem-Solution and General-Specific rhetorical patterns became apparent. The teacher navigated from personal experiences to societal impacts, illustrating a seamless transition from specific instances to broader contexts.

During this exercise, to guide and engage students through comprehension tasks, the teacher employed discourse organizers based on the Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST) by Mann and Thompson (1998). In that regard, the incorporation of discourse markers into these discussions aimed to foster their correct usage without overtly signaling this as the primary objective of the lesson, aligning with the principles of implicit language teaching (Ellis, 1994).

At the end of the lesson, a debate aroused naturally as students demonstrated an enhanced ability to analyze and summarize the text given, critically evaluate the impacts of social media, and utilize discourse markers effectively. Thus, this discussion enriched learners' analytical capabilities to successfully incorporate discourse structures into their language expressions. Then, the teacher ended the lesson by thanking students for their participation and their contribution to our research.

What could be found after implementing the intervention was that students demonstrated an enhanced ability to express their concerns about social media utilizing discourse markers effectively. This result echoed Hernandez and Rodriguez (2013) study on the acquisition of L2 Spanish discourse markers under explicit and implicit learning conditions. These authors argued that explicit instruction combined with input flood on discourse markers enhances students to better structure a narrative text. However, the results obtained from the present study contradict the findings of a study that explored the impact of teaching discourse structures on language proficiency. For instance, Alraddadi 's (2016) study revealed that employing a Task-Based Language Approach increased students' posttest results on the use of the target discourse markers compared with those obtained when employing the Presentation-Practice-Production model for teaching DM.

Throughout the lesson it was remarked intrinsically how the teacher implemented Michael Hoey's (1983) Rhetorical Structure of Problem-Solution Discourse (SPRE). This was

useful because it provided a structured framework for students to articulate complex ideas, evaluate them critically, and effectively utilize discourse markers. Students identified the background information of the text (Situation); then, the issues or obstacles under discussion (Problem). Based on the information provided, students were able to locate the proposed solution (Response), and finally, to critically assess the efficacy of the proposed solutions (Evaluation). This results also resonate Rustipa et al (2023) study on rhetorical structure strategies employed by undergraduate students for writing a problem statement. Those students used specific strategies for generalizing around a topic, to review previous research. On the other hand, they lacked of knowledge with linguistic features.

The lesson helped students to summarize information by identifying the meaning and function of different discourse markers. This procedure has also been adopted in other studies, for example Caselles (2014). This study used a specific model to teach discourse markers to English as a Foreign Language students with the aim to explore how primary school children use Discourse Markers in their discourse by exposure to pragmatic information. This synergy between the theory and practice, emphasizing context and language awareness, forms the cornerstone of a robust pedagogical approach in TEFL. This procedure illustrated the students' capacity not only to understand but also to effectively utilize discourse markers to articulate and evaluate ideas surrounding the influence of social media. Therefore, it can be assumed that teaching students the nature and the pragmatics of Discourse Markers seems to be an effective strategy for integrating theoretical knowledge with practical application in language teaching (McCarthy & Carter, 1993; McCarthy, 1991).

Finally, as we reflect on the lesson's outcomes, it is evident that the symbiotic relationship between theoretical insights and practical application significantly contributes to the enhancement of language skills and critical thinking abilities among students. The gradual progression of student participation and comprehension, aligned with the chosen teaching methodology, affirms the efficacy of the integrated DA perspective in TEFL.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this inquiry explored how the incorporation of DA principles into teaching methodologies can significantly improve students' critical thinking and communicative abilities. Within the DA theories we focus on textual patterns in discourse, utilizing the Problem-Solution and General-Specific patterns, as well as exploring signaling and discourse organizers. The previously DA theories were intrinsic goals that were hidden under the general topic of social media and the objective of developing critical thinking and language proficiency, particularly their reading comprehension skills.

The reflective analysis of the didactic intervention further emphasized the importance of a symbiotic relationship between theory and practice in language teaching. The successful incorporation of DA principles, coupled with pedagogical strategies rooted in established theories, contributed significantly to the enhancement of language skills and critical thinking abilities among students. Therefore, the application of these thematic elements not only enriched the students' roles as future educators and language professionals but also enhances their language proficiency as active language users.

As TEFL educators, embracing the DA perspective enriches our pedagogical toolkit, providing a lens through which we can navigate the complexities of language use. While recognizing the limitations of a single lesson, the positive outcomes underscore the potential of integrating DA principles in language teaching methodologies. Furthermore, a continued exploration and adaptation of these principles in diverse contexts will further contribute to

improve the landscape of language education. Consequently, we need to familiarize students with a framework of DA and pedagogical strategies to improve their ability to communicate more efficiently.

Despite the success observed in the lesson, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First and foremost, the timing of the lesson might have influenced their initial level of engagement. A more established rapport might have yielded better results in organization. A longer period of familiarity might result into more nuanced insights into student performance and participation. Exploring ways to optimize the use of limited class time and balancing the various components of the lesson is crucial for future research and instructional design.

Another factor to consider is the reliance on a single lesson as the basis for assessment, which is something that introduces a limitation in terms of generalization. Results derived from a singular session are not representative of the overall population's capabilities, and the observed outcomes might exhibit variability over time. Future research could benefit from longitudinal studies or a series of lessons to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the sustained impact of DA principles.

Furthermore, while the employed assessment methods effectively gauged students' analytical and communicative abilities, the study acknowledges the need for diversification in assessment tools. A more varied set of evaluation methods would provide a more holistic view of students' language proficiency and critical thinking skills. Additionally, the study recognizes that students with lower English proficiency might face challenges comprehending the text's complexity and vocabulary. Future research could explore tailored assessments accommodating varying language levels within the student population.

In essence, while the study has illuminated the positive impact of integrating DA principles in TEFL, addressing those limitations is imperative for refining the methodology and enhancing the study's overall robustness. Future research endeavors can build upon these insights to contribute to the ongoing development of effective language teaching practices.

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