EQUIPPING TESOL TRAINEES TO TEACH THROUGH DISCOURSE

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Abstract

It has long been argued that Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL teachers) should view language at the level of discourse, that is, beyond the level of the sentence. Despite this, many pre-service training courses do not place much emphasis on such a view of language and this can result in trainees who try to avoid teaching grammar, overemphasize form or, crucially, undervalue the communicative nature of language as discourse. This article outlines these issues before reporting on a change to the pedagogy of an undergraduate training programme which has attempted to remedy this.

Introduction

The fundamental importance of context in establishing meaning has long been established in language teaching. Hymes (1972, cited in Celce-Murcia et al, 1995, p.7) challenged Chomsky's view of competence and performance by pointing out that such a model left little room for the role of context in the creation of communication. Subsequent models of communicative competence (Canale and Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1990; Celce-Murcia et al, 1995), put forward as a basis for the development of language programmes, materials and assessments have all emphasised the importance of context and that language should be viewed as discourse for successful communication. However, on pre-service TESOL training programmes, there is a sense that such models have not always been well-represented. The short nature of many pre-service courses in the field tends to leave trainees focusing on the mechanical aspects of grammar rather than encouraging a deeper, context-related view of language.

This problem can be illustrated by examining sample lesson aims taken from TESOL trainees' lesson plans:

◗ By the end of the lesson, the students will know the difference between present perfect and present perfect continuous

◗ By the end of the lesson, students will be familiar with and able to use reported speech

◗ By the end of the lesson, students will be able to produce formal and informal letters.

Each aim statement is insufficient as a clear lesson aim, for varying reasons, but the statements also reveal something of the attitude to language of trainees on initial English language teaching courses. This attitude is often pre-occupied with a view of language at the sentence level and where a trainee has attempted to deal with language at a textual level, there is insufficient analysis of the features of the text in question. For example, for the type of letter to be taught, what are the expected conventions in terms of the information to be included? How should the text be organised and what linguistic features will need to be taught? Lesson plans with similar aims to those above often take the language focus as the starting point and tend to involve an explanation of the mechanics of the target form with sentence level examples before additional mechanical practice, often without a clear context.

The nature of the problem

Over the last three years, discussions between trainers while looking at learners' lesson plans and reflecting on the feedback from trainee-taught classes during standardisation, course-evaluation and planning meetings on the TESOL programme at UCLan, have led the team to identify a range of common trainee responses to teaching language:

1. Avoiding teaching language/Over-teaching language

Trainees adopting an avoidance strategy will typically choose to carry out 'skills' lessons which come down to 'teaching' a reading text and explaining new words that come up in it. The opposite position is where the trainee takes the view that grammar *is* the language, so every lesson is focussed on grammatical features such as reported speech or the passive. In most cases, these classes will not go far beyond the form, i.e. how to construct the target language and grammar book examples. Even with higher level learners, trainees will often neglect meaning and use, the areas where learners at these levels tend to have the largest amount of difficulty. Trainees may also neglect important features of language such as pronunciation.

2. A mechanical view of language

In this situation, the trainee seeks to explain all features of natural occurring language in terms of the grammar 'rules'. Where these rules are violated, the trainee is apt to disregard the example as being 'ungrammatical' and 'incorrect'. As a result, utterances such as, 'if two members of staff happen to fall in love and decide to marry, it would be churlish to be apportioning blame' (British National Corpus, 2009) would be dismissed as 'colloquial' as it does not conform to the rules that the trainee has learnt governing conditionals, an issue discussed in depth elsewhere (Jones and Waller, 2011). Equally, features such as the Present Simple used as a narrative tense, often used for anecdotes, jokes or stories (e.g. *A man walks into a library and says* …), would be viewed as an anomaly despite the fact there is a great deal of evidence that this form is commonly in use (see for example, Adolphs and Carter 2003).

3. General anxiety about grammar

By over-focussing trainees on grammatical rules, there is a risk of undermining the trainees' confidence of their innate knowledge of the language. Trainees begin to perceive grammar as a set of traps intended to snare them in lessons, rather than looking at a piece of language and considering its role in the given context.

4. Neglect of the communicative nature of language

A preoccupation with grammar may lead a trainee to forget that the principle purpose of any text is to communicate. Trainees construct convoluted activities to railroad their students into using a particular piece of language, rather than considering whether the language would naturally arise in a given context. Trainees may also not consider what an author or speaker intended or who the intended audience of a text was, all of which provide essential insights into the choice of language. Above all, there is a failure to *account for* the language choices that writers and speakers make. Trainees with a mechanical view of language would identify and explain to their students the form of former President Reagan's quote 'mistakes were made', but fail to point out the communicative purpose, that the form is indivisible from the message and that an active version of the sentence ('Somebody made mistakes') is in no sense parallel.

The consequences of the points set out above cause problems, not only for the trainees but also for the learners that they may encounter in the early stages of their career. With regard to TESOL trainees, Lewis (1993, pp.189-193), suggests that a pre-occupation with grammar on the part of teachers is one of the reasons for student problems and he lays a hefty portion of the blame at the door of teacher-preparation programmes. Additionally, if trainees are left to 'work it out', it may take years before they get to grips with the socially-embedded meaning carried by language or seek another way of dealing with texts. This is particularly an issue for those trainees who end up going to work in the area of teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or similar settings as these areas require specific text types to be produced with particular audiences in mind. For international TESOL trainees, the predominant focus during TESOL courses on the mechanics of language is also problematic. Liu (1998) makes the point that many international trainees will have learned English largely through grammar-based teaching and that what they require is not 'explicit study of English grammar but training to enhance their active competence' (Liu 1998, p.7). Clearly, a post-TESOL trainee, going into an EAP environment armed only with a mechanical view of how language works will have few resources to fall back on to deal with the text types they and their students will encounter.

We would also suggest that many published textbooks also contribute to these problems. There is a tendency in a lot of materials to present language (particularly grammar) with little concern for spoken or written context or frequency of use, as a set of sentences and not as something which operates at the level of discourse.

Table 1 (below) illustrates this problem. We examined the use of Past Perfect Simple ('*I had cooked dinner* by the time everyone got home') in three popular General English textbooks in use in the UK (*Natural English Intermediate, Outcomes Intermediate* and *New Headway Intermediate*) and abroad and examined the extent to which they help with these issues. All three text books presented the form through the use of narrative but only one of the text books made it clear that it was spoken language that was being focussed on and the genre of narrative. Both *Outcomes* and *Natural English* present the language with co-occurring lexis, such as 'I suddenly remembered that I'd left the gas on' and adverbs often used with the form. *Headway* gave little indication about the frequency of the form, and did not distinguish between presentation in written or spoken text and confusingly switched between contexts and functions without

clearly establishing contexts, which does little to guide trainees or learners about the frequency of the form. By failing to present the piece of language in a clear context, *Headway's* material runs the risk of making the past perfect look like a form as frequent as any other, and fails to illustrate the roles that it plays in contexts such as spoken narratives.

Table 1: Comparison of presentation of Past Perfect in three textbooks

Textbook	Context given	Information about frequency of form	Type(s) of practice given
New Headway Intermediate (p.22 – 25)	Initial presentation in a written story Questions and response (no context) Listening to a spoken anecdote	None provided	Matching questions and responses Information gap activity Compare version of story with model
Natural English Intermediate (p.136 – 7)	Presented in a spoken narrative with transcript	Frequent Collocations given Presented as spoken language for narratives then in a written story	Listen and identify form Matching exercises Guided discovery (choose correct form) Additional listening practice of a narrative
Outcomes Intermediate (p.11 – 12)	Presented in a written text, but in a spoken style	Context and patterns of use Associated adverbs	Read and retell the story Match tenses with usage

For the future students of these trainees, the consequences of a failure to look beyond a mechanical grammar focus may have more serious repercussions. Ashwell (2000) cites Ferris and Hedgcock's 1998 study into the responses of academics to the writing of students using English as their second language and reports that failure to meet the expectations of the genre, along with errors of form, may result in negative evaluation by lecturers, a warning which echoes Swales (1990). Johns (1997, cited in Hyland 2003) points out that in order to function effectively in the target discourse communities, students must have access to the modes of communication used by the group and that 'without the resources to understand these genres, [L2] students in universities … will find their own writing practices regarded merely as failed attempts to approximate prestigious forms' (p. 24). Coe (1994, cited in Grabe and Kaplan 1996) urges the importance of mastering not only the knowledge but also the particular genres employed in that community in order to gain recognition within it. If their teacher is unable to provide insights into the expectations of the readers of specific genres, due to being overly focussed on grammatical features, then the learners, at least in the short term, may not get the type of support that they require to fulfil their potential on their courses.

Issues of employability

Many trainees find initial, post-course employment either in private language schools around the world and then on pre-sessional programmes in the UK. In both, trainees are often preparing international students for academic study in the UK, or in English medium universities in other countries. Trainees may find themselves faced with English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes (such as English for Academic Purposes,

English for Medicine, Business English etc.), where the learners require specific types of English for their professional lives. TESOL training programmes provide the classroom management skills for trainees, but they may also, for some trainees, be their first introduction to the study of language itself. Borg (1998) argues that teachers gain much of their approach to the teaching of grammar from their own experiences of language learning and exposure to language. However, when there is an overemphasis on grammar, or a mechanical view of language is adopted by training courses, trainees are not sufficiently prepared to deal with EAP/ESP learners and their needs. Trainees also may not have the skills to 'induct' these learners into the genres that they need to master, or be able to assist the learners in considering the purpose of texts and the resulting impact on an author's choice of language. Indeed, the way TESOL courses present language to trainees can actively contribute to these problems by overemphasising the mechanical aspects of grammar rather than emphasising that 'linguistic competence cannot be separated from discourse competence' (McCarthy and Carter 1994, p.174).

The UCLan Context

At UCLan, trainees are able to study TESOL as either a minor, major or joint part of a degree programme. Many trainees choose to combine TESOL with a modern foreign language such as Japanese or Spanish. The Trinity Certificate award, a pre-service internationally recognised certificate in teaching English, is embedded in years one and two of the programme. This is summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Taught and assessed aspects of language awareness in core TESOL modules at UCLan

	Year 1 (Trinity Cert Embedded)	Year 2 (Trinity Cert Embedded)	Final Year
Taught	Tense system Phonemic script	Language features including modals, phrasal verbs, conditionals, segmental & super-segmental features of pronunciation, etc. Discourse analysis	Language awareness
Assessment methods	Language awareness tests Peer teaching Language workbook	Language awareness test Teaching practice Learner profile Materials assignment	Mock job interview including materials task Teaching practice

One of the issues that the course team has considered is how far the method of instruction on language awareness on the programme is responsible for promoting a mechanical view of language typified by the aims statements at the start of this article. It was felt that presenting language purely at the sentence level and over-focus on the tense system was potentially distorting the trainees' view of language. In order to counter this, it was decided that in the second year of the programme trainees would be exposed to a discourse view of language. There were three main aims behind the approach. The first of these was to sensitise students to the links between text purpose, audience and context. This relationship is summarised in Figure 1 (below). By highlighting features of discourse, the aim on the TESOL programme was to encourage trainees to look beyond sentence-level grammar and consider the purpose of a text and the role of context in determining the grammatical/lexical choices made by the writer/speaker. The intention was to alert trainees to the fact that 'linguistic features of [a] text … reflect the social context in which it was produced' (McCarthy 1991, p. 32) and that these are issues that need to be considered when a text is brought into the classroom to be taught to learners.

Figure 1: A Process Genre Approach to Teaching Writing
(Martin 1993 cited in Badger and White 2000)
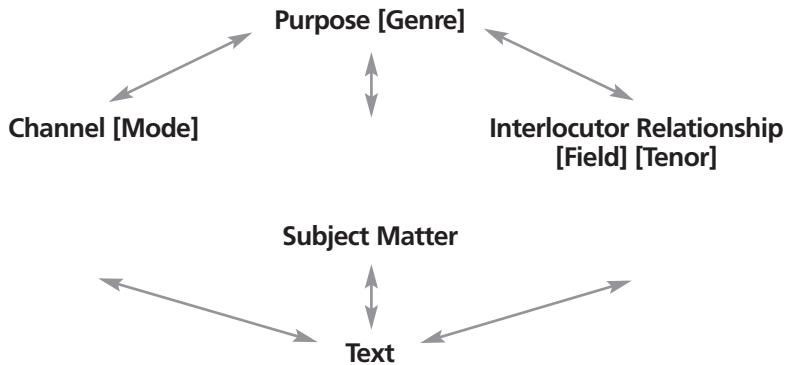
The second and third aims of our approach were to provide trainees with a tool to analyse text types when preparing for lessons and to assist them in accounting for actual language use. By introducing trainees to basic discourse analysis, the aim is to encourage them to make the relationships between the points illustrated in Figure 1 explicit so that the trainee can begin to highlight these to learners in the classroom.

A discourse approach also serves to remind trainees that the principle purpose of texts is to communicate. By asking them to consider the context of a text, the intention of the writer/speaker and the purpose of the text, trainees are encouraged to ensure that any texts used in the classroom will start out from a consideration of the text's socially-embedded meaning, rather than simply as a material for grammar practice.

In the first stage of the approach trainees are introduced to the notion of genre. Candlin and Hyland's (1999, p. 12) definition of genre is used: 'a framework of conventions and understandings within which individuals can communicate concisely and effectively with their peers'. The trainees are exposed to other definitions of genre, and wider reading is required on the programme, but Candlin and Hyland's definition is a practical one with which trainees can work. Through exercises trainees are asked to identify what features they would expect to see in different text types as well as discuss what is meant by 'conventions and understandings' and 'peers'.

The trainees' notion of genre is extended by giving them exerts from written and spoken texts where the trainees are asked to broadly identify what genre each text is. This leads onto the important question of 'how do you know that?'. Trainees are asked what 'labels' they would put on each text to describe it (e.g. academic, legal, professional etc.) and to consider who was writing/speaking to whom and the nature of the relationship between these individuals, and how the language used in the texts exemplifies the relationship. Through this activity trainees are introduced to the terms field, tenor and mode (Halliday 1994; Halliday and Hasan 1989) and the role of each in making up a genre and meeting the intended purpose of the writer/speaker of the text. Trainees are encouraged to build such activities into their classes in order to develop language learners' awareness of different genres and uses of language. This is done by adding extra questions into lessons where texts (written or spoken) are used:

What kind of text is this?
What labels would you put on this text in terms of its style?

Where would you expect to see/hear this kind of text?
Who is the intended audience?

Who is speaking/writing to whom?
What are they talking/writing about?
Where do you think they are?

or

What do you think is the relationship between the speakers/writer and reader?

How do you know?

The other area focused on with trainees is discourse features both macro and micro. Accessible macro patterns such as Labov's features of spoken narratives (in McCarthy 1991, pp. 137-8) and Hoey's (1983) SPRE (Situation, Problem, Response and Evaluation) structures are taught as they have fairly wide applicability but trainees are also made aware that these are by no means the only structures available. With micro features, trainees are exposed to cohesive devices, both lexical and grammatical.

Impact of the changes

There have been incremental improvements in lessons as a result. Lesson aims over the second and final years tend to become more about examining the language that arises from texts with trainees better able to analyse the role of the language in a spoken or written text and how it connects with the text's purpose. Greater awareness of the role of discourse is evidenced by aims produced by trainees such as 'By the end of the lesson students will be able to better recognise and understand the basic rules and use of ellipsis in spoken discourse; in the context of informal transactional language, particularly giving instructions and requesting'. The lesson itself focuses on ordering food in a café and uses recordings and transcripts to provide a model of the language in context. An example of a lesson with a more explicit language focus has the aim 'the learners will be better able to use the present perfect simple and continuous when writing to their friend about their life in Preston using the following chunks: I have been studying…/I have been working…/I have learned…/I have met…/I have been spending…/It has been…'. Again, the language is presented through a clear context and through a meaning-orientated exploration of a model text. Learners are asked to 'discuss why the present perfect has been used instead of the present' – encouraging them to make a link between the linguistic choice and the writer's intended meaning and purpose.

Conclusion

The UCLan TESOL programme has attempted to give trainees a more holistic view of the language than many new teachers emerge from programmes with. There has been some success so far in that we have seen better language lessons dealing with authentic texts and trainees exploring the connection between language and meaning with their learners. This is a modest start, but it is to be hoped that a discourse view of language will go some way towards helping our newly-qualified teachers assist their future EAP/ESP learners in exploring text types appropriate to academic contexts, and fostering an awareness of the indivisibility of language, genre, audience and purpose.

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