

# Generating Discourse in English Classrooms

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## **Introduction**

The poor quality of English language teaching and learning in our country has been a central topic of discussions on quality parameters of education, be it at the primary, secondary or tertiary level. Even after learning the English language for a respectable period of 10 to 12 years, most students complete their school or college education with a defective language apparatus, which stands as a barrier for them in all their academic and career enterprises.

Why does this happen? There is no point in blaming the learners, or even the teachers. The learners learn English for a number of years, but what they learn is not a language but a baggage of language facts consisting of vocabulary, structures, usages and a large number of questions and answers. The teachers 'deliver' the lessons just like a postman delivers letters to their addressees. The postman is not supposed to read and interpret the letters or reflect on their contents; such acts will be no less than professional sacrilege. The receivers in turn do not tell the postman what they feel about the letters they have received. In a similar way, the contents of the textbooks are delivered to the learners who are expected to store them in their memory and reproduce them at the time of examination. At no point are the learners asked to express their thoughts, feelings or their reflections on what is delivered to them; throughout their academic life, they are never asked to produce language. This being the state

of affairs, it is unethical to grumble about their poor English, or their lack of communication skills. Any person who has an understanding about language will admit that language learning does not mean learning hundreds of questions and answers, or doing grammar and vocabulary exercises. We know about the traumatic experiences of the teachers and learners in English Classes. But what we have been doing does not seem to have contributed to relieving them from this nauseatingly lethargic drudgery of teaching and learning stale English words and sentences under the pretext of teaching language. Let us examine why this is so.

## **Innate Language Faculty**

Apart from the most common problems such as lack of a speech community or lack of exposure, English Language Teaching (ELT) in our country has an inherent problem. It grossly ignores the innate language system of the child. Materials and methods are based on the behaviourist assumption that the mind of a child is an empty vessel and everything concerning language comes from outside. By virtue of the cognitive revolution of the 1960s, various innovative methods for facilitating second language learning have evolved across the world. Despite this, insights in cognitive psychology, theoretical linguistics and critical pedagogy are still not reflected in the educational system of our country.

The present model of language teaching is intrinsically deficient in that it completely ignores discourse level transactions, thus narrowing itself to the transmission of isolated language items. However, a word or even a sentence in isolation does not have an independent existence as these components function only in discourse. Language acquisition is accomplished by acquiring 'structure-consciousness'. This can be brought about only through meaningful and need-based linguistic discourse which ensures the recurrence of language items at the phonological, morphological and syntactic level, thus providing a continuum of language experience.

Above all, the non-critical ELT that is being practiced across the country will only put our nation into the shackles of linguistic imperialism. This is manifested in the ever-increasing preference for English medium schools, the clamour for standard English, an irrational dependence on straight-jacketed packages developed by market-driven forces, entrusting native speakers to teach English and the like, to mention a few.

It was in this context that I designed Discourse Oriented Pedagogy (DOP) for the states of Kerala and Andhra Pradesh (prior to bifurcation). The key assumption of this pedagogy is that language survives in the form of discourse and not as discrete sounds, words or sentences. The pedagogy has its impetus in the current understanding of what language is and how it is acquired.

### **Overview of Discourse-Oriented Pedagogy**

The salient features of DOP can be summarized as follows:

The learners get a rich linguistic experience by virtue of an increasing number of discourses and themes. On the one hand, the language input

and output of the learners include a variety of discourse genres such as story, poem, essay, drama etc., with the recurrence of the same theme (say, for example, marginalization). On the other hand, learners are exposed to the same discourse genre (for example, conversation) with different themes.

At all stages of classroom transaction, the prime concern is to make the input comprehensible to the learners so that there is no need to check comprehension. DOP assumes that comprehension is a process that takes place in the mind of the individual learner by virtue of the interplay of several factors such as context of the discourse, communicational expectancy triggered in the learner's mind, familiar words, images created through narratives, brainstorming through interaction, prosodic features, gestures and facial expressions used by the facilitator, code-switching, collaboration with peers, etc.

DOP also takes care of skill development within the context of experiencing a variety of discourse genres, and writing for a variety of purposes and audiences. These skills are not taught by isolating them from their use, or by means of artificially contrived skills lessons. No one can read an alphabetic language without taking into account the connection between sounds and symbols. In fact there are several cues available to the learner to help him / her make predictions about what is going to be read or heard. Teachers have to help children learn how to use all the available cues.

DOP conforms to the Whole Language philosophy. There is a solid foundation of research stemming from cognitive psychology and learning theory, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, language acquisition and emergent literacy, as well as from education, to support a whole language perspective. Researchers have found that whole language

learning/teaching fosters a much richer range of literacy attitudes, abilities, and behaviours than more traditional approaches. Since the focus is on the process and not the product, any teacher who is sincerely interested in becoming a discourse facilitator can become one as the teacher's role is crucial but only optimal.

### **Using Mother Tongue in the Second Language Class**

A major part of inputs given to children (especially at the primary level) is in the form of narratives which have been specially designed to create emotional gestalts in the listeners. However, in order to make the inputs comprehensible we have to fine-tune the narratives by minimizing their linguistic resistance. ELT schools across the world have started advocating judicious use of the mother tongue in the L2 classroom. But the term 'judicious' is very vague. So how is a teacher to interpret this term? She/he may resort to translation or code-mixing. However, translation is not a productive strategy for facilitating language acquisition. In code-mixing, the syntax of the mother tongue is taken as the base, and some words from English are included within the sentence frame. For example, '*Aaj main bilkul busy hun*' (I am very busy today). Most educated persons (and also illiterates) make use of this strategy. This however, is also not very helpful for language acquisition. There is yet another strategy in which the teacher switches over from one code (say, L1) to the other (L2). The switch-over takes place in the domain of discourse, not sentences. This kind of interlanguage is qualitatively different from code-mixing and translation, and can be pedagogically tapped. Let me illustrate the point with the help of a piece of narrative that can

be presented using code-switching in Grade I or II:

Raju was walking to school. At the roadside, there were thick bushes. Some of them had flowers on them.

"How nice!", he said to himself. Suddenly, he noticed that the leaves in the bushes on the left side were moving.

"There is no wind. And only those leaves are moving!" Raju became curious. "I'm sure there must be something in that bush."

He went near the bush, moved the leaves to one side with his hand and peeped in.

"What is that?" Raju wondered.

"Mew!"

"Oh, it's a cat!" he said in surprise.

Let us assume that the story is narrated in the learner's mother tongue, and switches over to English wherever the expressions are underlined. There will be no barrier for the learners to comprehend the expressions in L2. The strategy of switching codes as suggested here will help the learners understand the message without translation. Notice that the narrative is contrived in such a way that the ideas contained in the underlined sections will be generated in the minds of the learners as mental texts.

### **Curricular Objectives in Terms of Discourse**

Discourse Oriented Pedagogy necessitates the redefining of curricular objectives in terms of discourse and not in terms of structures and their relevant communication functions. Table 1 shows the various discourses targeted in classes 1 to 10.

Table 1  
*Class-wise Targeted Discourses*

No	Type of Discourse	Grades									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1.	Conversations	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
2.	Descriptions	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
3.	Rhymes /songs /poems	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
4.	Narratives	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
5.	Diaries				■	■	■	■	■	■	■
6.	Letters				■	■	■	■	■	■	■
7.	Notices				■	■	■	■	■	■	■
8.	Drama			■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
9.	Profiles					■	■	■	■	■	■
10.	Biographical sketches						■	■	■	■	■
11.	Short Essays / Essays					■	■	■	■	■	■
12.	Reports						■	■	■	■	■
13.	News reports						■	■	■	■	■
14.	Slogans			■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
15.	Speeches						■	■	■	■	■
16.	Reviews							■	■	■	■
17.	Debates / Discussions								■	■	■
18.	Compering				■	■	■	■	■	■	■
19.	Travelogues					■	■	■	■	■	■
20.	Choreography	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■

## Discourse Gradation

Table 1 shows that the discourse can be constructed at various levels. It does not specify however which features of the discourse are to be learnt at a certain level. Take for instance, a discourse such as conversation; in order to differentiate between the conversations constructed by a primary school learner from those constructed by a high school student we need to identify the various linguistic levels of the discourse. The conversation as a discourse contains an initiation and a response to this initiation. A beginner's conversation will only contain an initiation and a response, but as she/he goes up to higher levels, the conversations will become more refined both structurally and stylistically. I would like to illustrate this point with the help of a few pieces of conversation.

1. Raju: Where is your book?  
Rani: My book is on the on the table.
2. Priya: Where's your book, Maya?  
Maya: It's here, in my bag.
3. Rahim: You need some money, don't you?  
Ramu: Well, as a matter of fact I do.
4. Joseph: I wonder why that man is so harsh with his wife.  
Mary: Why this question all of a sudden?  
Joseph: Oh, nothing. You see, I was just thinking about him.  
Mary: Don't pretend. You're thinking about her, weren't you?

The conversation constructed at the primary level may not have discourse markers or tags in it. But a conversation constructed by a high school student will necessarily contain such linguistic elements. Similar differentiation will be necessary for other discourses also. Thus we can achieve the gradation of discourse and replace the earlier structural gradation.

## The Modular Mode of Transaction

Discourse Oriented Pedagogy envisages a modular mode of classroom transaction. For pedagogic purposes, we may define a module as an activity package that leads to the construction of an idea or a concept. Although a module can stand independently, it may also be used in conjunction with another module. At the end of the transaction of each of these modules, certain constructs will be developed in the minds of learners. 'Transaction' in this case is a loaded expression in the sense that it involves well-defined processes. Discourses such as conversations, descriptions, narratives, songs, letters, etc., targeted at a certain level may be used to build listening and reading skills by embedding them in a mother narrative meant for listening. The interaction that will take place through these will allow the learners to the construct discourses both in the oral and written forms.

Looking at the transaction module as a process-bound entity, the development of a discourse may be conceived as yet another module of the language class. It is easy to discern that these are not merely transaction modules but also language modules. For instance, an interaction which involves both listening and speaking may be considered as a language module that can stand independent of its pedagogic purpose because a language survives through interaction among its speakers. Similarly, reading is an independent activity that individuals may pursue on their own, which need not be perceived as a pedagogic activity. The construction of discourse is yet another language module that can stand independently. Let us say that all these are sub-modules that can be sequentially linked together to make an organic whole.

## Field Evidence

When DOP was first introduced in the state curriculum of Kerala in 2007, children in the

primary classes of one of the districts (Alappuzha) produced nearly 20,00,000 journals in English with their creative writing. The results of the recent curriculum revision in English are reflected in the increased general proficiency level of trainers, teachers and students—a fact that has been documented in the study conducted by Regional Institute of English, South India (RIESI), Bengaluru. DOP was subsequently introduced in Andhra Pradesh as part of the curriculum revision that was initiated in 2011. How the pedagogy works in odd situations (such as a single teacher handling all the subjects in more than one class division, first generation learners, teachers without any specialization in English, etc.) was demonstrated in 42 Government primary schools of Narketpally Mandal of Nalgonda district in Andhra Pradesh. Children from various schools presented plays, dances and action songs in English. There was also a colourful display of more than 3000 magazines in English developed by children in the primary classes without any support from outside the classroom.

Teachers who follow the classroom process envisioned in the curriculum have understood the impact of the shift in the pedagogy. They realize that teaching the lessons by simply explaining the meaning of words and sentences and asking children to learn the comprehension questions and their answers will not be enough; they have to help the children construct their own oral and written discourse.

The changes visible in most of the classes that use DOP are:

1. Group products displayed in the form of charts.
2. Pictures drawn by teachers to promote interaction.

3. Big canvas and cut-outs of the figures depicted in the textbooks.
4. Children sitting in groups and sharing their reading experience with others.
5. Better interaction between teacher and learners.
6. Team work among staff.
7. Recorded performances of children by teachers using mobile phones.

DOP is the culmination of more than two decades of intensive experimentation on how sustainable pedagogical models can be evolved with a view to resisting the vicious spread of linguistic imperialism by decolonizing English and bridging the gap between theory and practice. It is expected that the new pedagogy will solve most of the issues related to the poor performance standards of students in English.

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