

Written Discourse Analysis and its Application in ELT

Jianli Yao

Henan Economy & Trade Vocational College, China. E-mail: yjl306@163.com

Abstract

This paper, by reviewing relative literature and scholarly discussion, looks at the practicality and possibility of applying discourse analysis to English language teaching to learners from non-English speaking countries. It then explores aspects and dimension a written discourse need to cover in order to be helpful with task-based language teaching. Taking an English textbook article as an example, it further illustrated how discourse analysis may be applied to such a task-based course design to help learners with understanding and using of the language in a natural conversational perspective. By drawing examples of the author's own teaching experience, the author concludes that discourse analysis, particularly the analysis of text pattern should play a more important part in reading and writing lessons alike in ELT.

Key words: discourse analysis, written discourse, English language learning, TEFL

Introduction

Discourse analysis of language, spoken and written alike, proved to be very helpful and inspiring in linguistics studies and English language teaching (ELT). This paper, with a specific focus on analysis of written texts, deals with some basic aspects of discourse analysis and its possible application in ELT. By making a simple literature review at the beginning, the first part makes a brief introduction to the origin and development of discourse analysis as a discipline. And then, the first part mainly covers some elementary conceptions and dimensions to be taken into account when the written discourse is analyzed. The second part in turn discusses a text entitled *Earthquakes Leave Loose Material All Shook Up*, taken from *New Scientist*, Volume 126. This part makes an illustration in detail of different aspects of written discourse analysis listed in previous part, particularly an analysis

of its text patterns and its selection of cohesive devices. Lastly, by referring to the analysis done in part two, some suggestions are raised about how analysis of written discourse could help in teaching written English, with examples of my own teaching experience.

What is Meant by Discourse Analysis and What to Analyze in a Written Discourse?

As McCarthy, M. (1991) summarized, when most linguists' major concerns were still with analyzing the structure of sentences, Zellig Harris published his paper entitled *Discourse Analysis* in 1952, in which he showed interests in the linguistic elements distribution in extended texts. Although what he studied was different from the discourse analysis studied today, more and more scholars, either of linguistics or of other disciplines, began to involve themselves in relevant studies. It was from all those studies in 1960s and 1970s, that that discourse analysis, which "is concerned with the study of the relationship between language and the contexts in which it is used"(McCarthy, M. 1991P5), developed into "a wide-ranging and heterogeneous discipline, which finds its unity in the description of language above the sentence and an interest in the contexts and cultural influences which affect language in use" (McCarthy, M.1991 P7). Stubbs (1983) defined discourse analysis as a field of research, which is concerned with 1) the use of language over the level of a sentence/utterance, 2) the interrelationships between language and society and 3) the interactive properties of daily communication.

In addition to M.A.K. Halliday's functional approach to language, Sinclair and Coulthard at the University of Birmingham were as important and influential to the development of Discourse Analysis in Britain (McCarthy, M.1991). Michael Hoey also contributed his own understanding of discourse. He roughly summarized discourse as any stretch of spoken or written language, longer than one sentence, which is self-contained in a reasonable way. Therefore, Hoey argued that "discourse analysis is the area of linguistics that concerns itself with the study of these multi-utterance acts of communication."(Hoey, M.1991)

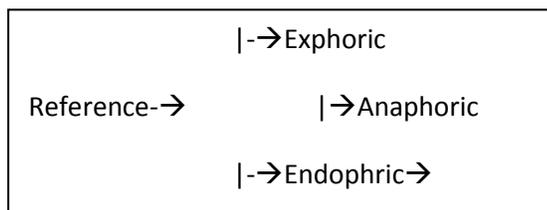
As Discourse Analysis covers both spoken interactions and all kinds of written and

printed texts: “newspaper articles, letters, stories, recipes, instructions, notices, comics billboards, leaflets pushed through the door, and so on.”(McCarthy, M.1991 P12), it is impossible to talk about it in detail in a short essay like this. This essay is merely concerned with the analysis of written discourse.

While the spoken discourse analysis focuses on the discussion of exchange structures and analysis of conversations, the discourse analysis of written texts usually takes into accounts coherence, cohesions and text patterns. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), a text, “not just a string of sentences”, can be either spoken or written and of any length. It is not simply a large grammatical unit, something of the same kind as a sentence, but a semantic unit whose “texture” is dictated by its interpretation within a particular context, or environment. Halliday and Hasan (1976) have done much research into what makes a text a text, i.e. how we can differentiate a cohesive grammatical unit from a random collection of sentences. Five cohesive devices have been sorted out, namely, “reference, substitution, ellipses, conjunctions and lexical ties” (Hatch, 1992 p223).

Reference is usually established by using pronouns, demonstratives and comparatives as cohesive ties. If subdivided, reference could be exphoric when referring to something outside the text, or it can be endophoric, a reference within a text, referring to the person(s) or item(s) talked about within a previous (anaphoric) and/or succeeding (cataphoric) context. This can be more easily recognized through a grid as follows:

Figure 1: Establishment of a Reference within a Text



In contrast to reference, substitution is the replacements of an item mentioned previously. It can be used to substitute nominal, verbal or clausal items. For example, when an item is mentioned for the second time, it is more likely to be replaced by *one(s)* or *it (them)* to avoid unnecessary repetition.

Ellipses, seemingly the same as substitution, are also used to establish ties to

nominals, verbals and clauses for the sake of concision. What distinguishes ellipsis from substitution is that ellipsis is a “zero” cohesive devices because it is not actually said or written down.

Another cohesive device, conjunction, as its name suggests, is employed to link clauses, such as *besides, yet, therefore, then*, etc, by showing additive, adversative, causal, temporal or other different kinds of conjunctive relations.

The last category of cohesive device of Halliday and Hasan’s system is the device of lexical ties. To achieve lexical cohesion, we can use repetition, synonym, near synonym, superordinate, general words, antonym ordered series, metonymy, members of the same lexical set or any words from the same semantic field (Halliday and Hasan, 1976, chapter 6).

Besides grammatical and lexical cohesion, clausal relations and text patterns should also be dealt with in written discourse analysis. Clausal relations, including logical sequence, matching or multiple clause relations, are defined as shared cognitive processes “whereby we interpret the meaning of a clause or group of clauses in the light of their adjoining clause or group of clauses” (Winter 1994:p49). Text patterns are something to show the writer’s logic of organizing ideas and his/her actual way of presenting them in a written text since “every writer is face with the problem of how or organize and present his/her non-linear message in comprehensible linear form” (Coulthard, M. 1994 p7). As Hoey (1983 and 2001) summarized, text patterns fall into categories including: a). problem-solution pattern, through which a solution is provided to a problem raised by the writer, usually at the beginning of the text; signaled by words as *issue, problem, situation*, and *assessment, approaches, solution*; b). goal-achievement pattern, showing the relationship between what people set as aims and the way to realize them, with signaling words like *want to, would like to, aim, objective* and *means, method, way*; c). opportunity-taking pattern, providing chances in certain situations and how to make use of them, using signals including *opportunity, offer, unique, special, unusual, outstanding* and *meet, come upon, find, read, hear, or see*; d). gaping in knowledge-filling, providing concrete and exact answer to what may be beyond people’s common sense, signaled by words such as *question, puzzle, mystery* and *explanation, hypothesis, theory, suggest, solve*; e). claim-counterclaim (response) pattern, whose signals are often words of claim, and words of denial or affirmation, usually signaled by *claim, suggest, propose* and so

on; or f). Interlocking pattern, which may combine goals-methods and problem-response in one. It is through all these “culturally popular” text patterns that the authors present the readers cohesive, coherent, interesting, inspiring, and/or thought-provoking written discourses.

Analysis and Discussion of *Earthquake Leave Loose Material All Shook Up*

After discussing the dimensions covered by written discourse analysis, I will analyze a text entitled *Earthquake Leave Loose Material All Shook Up*, written by Jeff Hecht and published in the magazine *New Scientist*, Volume 126, in April 1990. Through analyzing its selection of and text patterns, I hope to make clearer my discussion about written discourse analysis conducted in part one.

First of all, I would like to deal with the cohesive devices used in this article. As everyone can imagine, reference is the most frequently used cohesive device in English, particularly the one established through pronouns and demonstrative. The sample passage provided us many an example of references realized in this way. For example, the pronoun *they* in sentences 3 in paragraph I, *they* in sentence 2,3 in paragraph II and *they* in sentence 2, 3 in paragraph III all refer back to *mounds*. To be more exact, we can see them as examples of anaphoric reference as they refer to *mounds* in previous sentence(s). Similarly, *they* in sentence 2 of paragraph VII refers to particles in sentence 1 while the very last word *them* used to refer to *mounds* again. Other reference types can also be found as word *similar* in sentence 1 of paragraph V is an example of comparative reference, pointing at the way that *ash to clump together to form miniature mounds*. And *such* in sentence 4 of paragraph VI and *here* in sentence 2 of paragraph VII are demonstrative reference, referring respectively to *standing waves* (sentence 3, paragraph VI) and *null zones* (sentence 1, paragraph 7). Interestingly, there is one more such example, as *this* in the second sentence below the illustration referring to what is mentioned in previous sentence.

Besides, the author also used ellipses in the article, as can be seen in *Charles Higgins of the university of California at Davis says: “I don’t think ...it explains ...that many published hypotheses don’t”* sentence 2 of paragraph VIII--- the verb *explains* is omitted after *don’t*. In addition, in sentence 2 of paragraph IX, *others*, is an example of substitution, taking

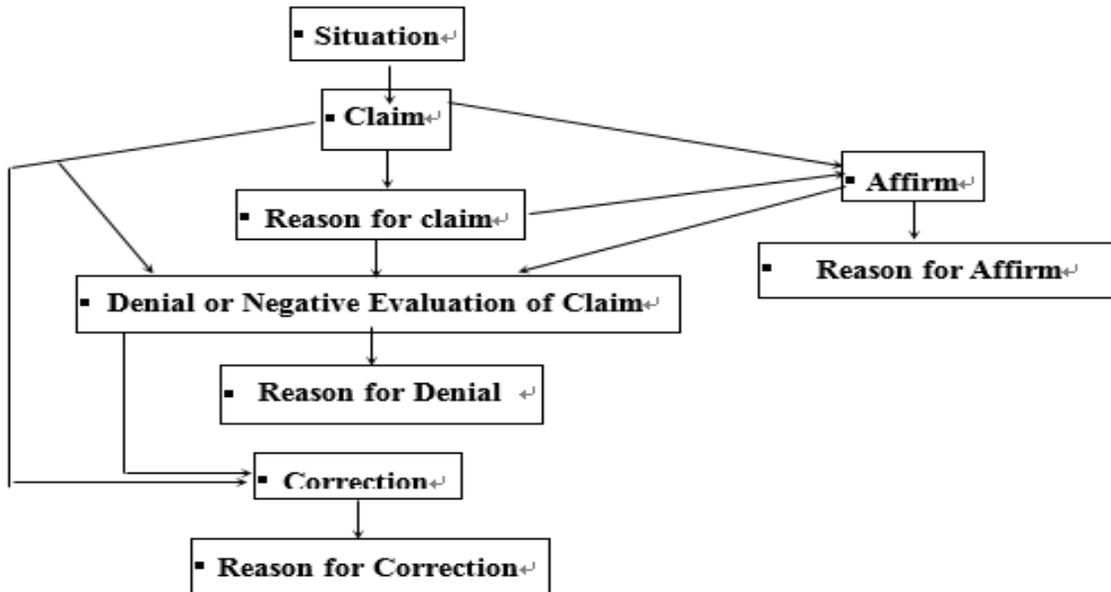
the place of *mounds*. All the *but* in sentence 4 of paragraph III, in sentence 3 of paragraph V and in the very last sentence of the passage are examples of conjunction. Other examples are, *while* in sentence 2 of paragraph IV, *when* in sentence 5 in paragraph V, and *however* in sentence 2 of paragraph IX.

Furthermore, many examples of lexical cohesions can be found throughout the passage. For instance, *mounds* are simply repeated so many times all through the article while *hillock* used as its synonymy in paragraph I. In paragraph II and III, words with similar meanings like *forming*, *existence*, *built*, and *result from* help realize lexical cohesion in talking about the origin of mounds. And From paragraph VI through IX, the author employed general words like *places zones* and *areas* to achieve cohesion in lexis when talking about the sites where mounds can be found.

In addition to analyzing cohesive devices, clausal relations and text patterns of a higher textual level are to be analyzed in turn. Good writers need take into account the readers when they write (Koester, 2002 personal communication). Such a principle makes it very important for us to pay some attention to aspect. As mentioned in part one of this essay, clausal relations include logical sequence, matching or multiple clause relations. When it comes to this aspect, lexical cohesion device of conjunctions also play a rather important role and should be mentioned once again, because logical sequence relations are always signaled by conjunctions, though they do not have to be (Koester, 2002 personal communication). It is a shame that in the case of the analyzed text, we can only observe conjunctions like *but* and *however* are used to show contrast clausal relation, one type of matching relations between clauses.

Fortunately, this passage, as a piece of scientific writing, is a good example of claim-counterclaim (response) pattern of text, by the hint of signaling words like *believe* in sentence 2 and *suggests* in sentence 3 of paragraph I, *proposed* in sentence 1, *claim* in sentence 2 of paragraph II and many others. According to Hoey (2001), claim-counterclaim (response) pattern, also known as hypothetical-real pattern (Winter, 1994), which can be illustrated as shown in figure 2:

Figure 2: Stages in Claim-counterclaim Patterns, Based on Hoey (2001) p180



The general pattern structure of the cited passage, therefore, can be analyzed as:

Situation: Mysterious Origin of Mima Mounds

Claim: the vibration of earthquakes might cause Mima Mounds, made by Andrew Berg

Reasons for claim:

- ✓ his incidental experience of seeing the effect of vibration, (paragraph IV)
- ✓ no any similar previous suggestions by other geologists (paragraph V)
- ✓ hypothesis about the effect of seismic waves caused by earthquake (paragraph VI)

Affirm and Reason for it:

- ☞ many mounds are in earthquake zones (sentence 1, paragraph IX)
- ☞ explained aspects failed to be mentioned by other hypothesis (sentence 2 in paragraph VIII)

Denial / Negative Evaluation:

- ☒ no quantitative model of this phenomenon (sentence 2, paragraph VII)
- ☒ not predictable amount of energy to be needed (sentence 3, paragraph VII)
- ☒ other geologists' support of gopher theory

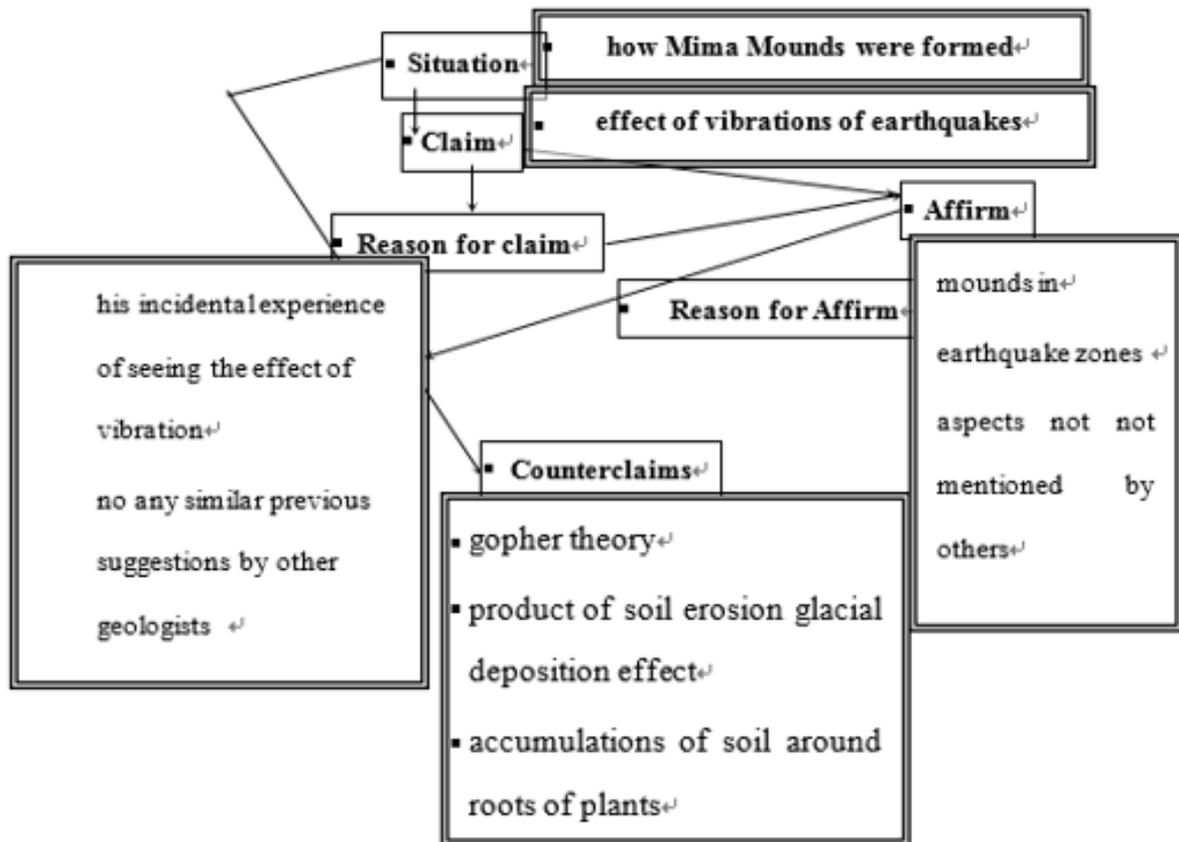
Counter Claim(s):

- ☞ gopher theory (paragraph III)
- ☞ product of selective erosion of soil (paragraph III)
- ☞ effect of glacial deposition (paragraph III)
- ☞ accumulations of soil around roots of plants (paragraph III)

As there is not yet an agreement reached among all the geologists, this article does not provide any correction to the claim and therefore the reason for correction is also missing.

Therefore, if the relevant information of this passage is added, the pattern shown in Figure 2 can be modified as follows. The words in double-line-edged grids attached to each item are listed as the explanation shown in Figure 3:

Figure 3: Modification of Claim-counterclaim Patterns



As different readers may interpret the text patterns from various angles, Berg’s claim could be analyzed as counterclaim against other geologists’ suggestions if theirs are regarded

as claims. It can also be argued that, if *the origin of mounds* is analyzed as a question raised by the author, all the claims of Berg or other geologists can be analyzed as possible solutions. Then the text pattern of the sample passage will fall into to another category, the problem-solution pattern, “arguably the most common pattern of all” (Hoey, 2001 p123). But just as Hoey (2001) argued, sometimes it is not necessary to distinguish whether a certain passage has this or that pattern since “clearly all the patterns we have been considering have much in common”(p166). They can all be summarized as SPRE (situation, problem, response and evaluation) pattern, and the part of problem, in many circumstances can also be the part of goal, opportunity, desire arousal, gap in knowledge, which triggers different responses, which then in turn lead to a negative evaluation to recycle the pattern and finally a positive evaluation to end the pattern.

Application of Written Discourse Analysis in ELT

Needless to say, analysis of written discourse is not just for fun of a very challenging intellectual game. McCarthy (1991) concluded that, though “not everything described by discourse analysis is relevant to or may have immediate applications in language teaching” (McCarthy, 1991. p147), language teachers are more likely to be able to “create authentic materials and activities for the classroom” (McCarthy, 1991. p147) if they are more familiar with how different texts are organized and how to realize the process of creating written texts.

Complete the gaps in the appropriate pronoun: I, you, he, she, it, we, they

The parents of a seven-year-old Australian boy woke to find a giant python crushing and trying to swallow ____.

The incident occurred in Cairns, Queensland and the boy’s mother, Mrs. Kathy Dryden said, “ ____ was like a horror movie. It was a hot night and Bartholomew was lying under a mosquito net. ____ suddenly started screaming.

“ ____ rushed to the bedroom to find a huge snake trying to strangle ____ . ____ was coiled around his arms and neck and was going down ____ body.

Mrs. Dryden and her husband Peter, tried to stab the creature with knives but the python bit the boy several times before escaping.

According to what is discussed in previous parts, it can be concluded that understanding of cohesive devices will be quite helpful for language learners. In reading practices, especially when doing exercises designed to increase reading speed, it is very important for the readers to see, without referring back to the read paragraphs, who are the referees whenever they encounter pronouns and/or demonstratives. Language teachers should provide constant guidance to the learners and always remind them of paying enough attention to this aspect. Besides, task-based activities may be designed to help students with their vocabulary study, through more understanding of lexical cohesion. The students do not have to stop to consult the dictionary if they can take a good guess at the meaning of some new words through their knowledge of lexical cohesions, especially those, particularly when synonyms, antonyms and/or words of the same semantic field are used. For example, in an exercise as above.

As Hatch (1992) cited, Johns (1984) noted that lexical cohesions are not as frequently used by Chinese teachers as by native speakers, since words and phrases are taught not as part of a semantically related chain but as isolated items. Things have changed a lot in ELT in China as traditional audio-lingual is giving its place to task-based or teaching. Vocabulary, due to its huge amount, tends to be the biggest problem for most of my students. Unfortunately, they should be told to remember new words in such a way so as to achieve a higher efficiency. Therefore, besides trying to find out the pronoun reference, students can also be guided to find out the meaning of the word *python*, with the help of its superordinate *snake*, after which they can be guided to find out words relevant to snake, including *crushing*, *swallow*, *coiled around* and *bit*.

In addition to employing cohesive devices in reading classes and/or vocabulary study, analysis of text pattern, in my personal opinion, is of an even greater importance. Hoey (2001) provided some implications of written discourse analysis for language learners, particularly those, like my former students, who are learning a language with a very different “rhetorical” expectations. Such learners should be instructed about ways “various patterns operate”. My students in China are mainly college students with an intermediate or higher level of English. And according to my personal understanding and experience, the analysis of text pattern is of particular importance for them. The students should have some knowledge of those culturally popular text patterns so that they will have the idea of what to expect in a certain passage and

they will also know what they are expected to include when making a certain piece of writing, since reading skills and writing techniques are parts of the same “organic body”. However, it is a shame that, in the practice of teaching English to college students in China, reading and writing are usually given, and therefore taken by the students, as two separated subjects. According to my own experience, such an approach reduces the mutual effect of reading and writing classes, whose mutual effects should otherwise be enhanced. What I usually do is to try to combine the instruction of reading skills and writing techniques into a whole coherent process. With the help of the analysis of written discourse, particularly that of text pattern, this goal is easier to be achieved.

For example, through a passage like *Earthquake Leave Loose Material All Shook Up*, a task-based lesson may be designed as follows to combine reading and writing practice into one by doing the discourse analysis.

To begin with, the teacher can have a discussion with the students about some mysteries in nature. This discussion is both a brainstorming and warming-up exercise, during which the teacher introduces the topic, the origin of the mounds. Then the teacher should give his/her students several minutes to scan the whole passage, which is then given to them as handouts for them to find some more words concerning this topic, or put it another way, words of the same semantic field.

After dealing with the new words in this passage, the teacher should then ask the students read the passage carefully to detect all the different claims made by different geologists about the origins of the mounds. The teacher should guide the students to analyze the text and give them the whole idea of claim-counterclaim (response) pattern by drawing a diagram of this pattern on the whiteboard. Then the students will be asked to find out the content of each correspondent part of the claim-counterclaim (response) pattern, as what is done in part two of this essay, while the teacher deals with the passage through the grammar-translation or whichever approaches he/she usually employs.

When the student all have a fairly clear idea of the way a claim-counterclaim (response) operates, they can be given a further introduction to some other text patterns and then the generalization of SPRE pattern. That is the end of the reading and analyzing part of the lesson.

The last part of this lesson should be the writing exercise, in which students should try to write an outline for a composition about a “mystery” in nature by offering some possible explanation to it. And they should be reminded to give the situation, their own claim and some other counterclaims. They should also provide reasons for the claims they make as well as reasons for the counterclaims from other sources. Lastly, they should make evaluation of the claim and reasons they present. If it is still a bit hard for the students to finish this in class, it can be given as assignment for them to do after school. But the learners do have to be reminded again of taking hints from the text-pattern of claim-counterclaim (response).

This is of course just a simple case of applying written discourse analysis in teaching written English. And it should be in a greater detail when actually applied in ELT classes. But it is definite that analysis of written discourse, especially that of text pattern, could help both the teacher and the students out in dealing with what to expect in a reading passage and what should be included when writing a certain passage.

Summary

From what McCarthy (1991) and Hoey (1991) have defined and summarized, it can be concluded that discourse analysis can be very helpful in language teaching and learning as it focuses more on naturally occurring language above the sentence level. It is certain that language acquisition is the ultimate goal of language lessons. And the teachers expect the student to be capable of using and understanding the language rather than recite some rules. Therefore, discourse analysis can be especially valuable and helpful when applied to language lessons. As Hoey (1991) mentioned, discourse analysis is relevant to language teaching, because “if the teacher knows what a natural conversation involves, he or she will be in a better position to assess whether their learners are succeeding in developing the conversational skills that they need.”(Hoey, 1991) This thoroughly explains how Discourse Analysis can help in second language teaching and learning.

Discourse analysis, particularly the analysis of text pattern should play a more important part in reading and writing lessons alike in ELT. And it has a more significant role to play in combing these two categories into one complete unit.

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