

## Studying discourse analysis: Does it have an impact on trainee English language teachers?

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### Introduction

One of the biggest challenges that I face as an applied linguist teaching on our university's undergraduate teacher education programme is to help my students appreciate the relevance of linguistic study to their everyday lives. The students that I have at the National Institute of Education (Singapore) are enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts (Education) programme, which means that they are not only undergraduates pursuing a degree in linguistics, but also at the same time trainee teachers who already know what their future line of work is going to be. Making the study of linguistics 'relevant' to these trainee teachers, then, often entails encouraging them to see how the topics we cover in class might be able to feed into their future teaching practice.

This challenge that I face in my teaching is not, I believe, unique to the National Institute of Education in Singapore. All around the world, an increasing number of university-based teacher education programmes are including as part of their undergraduate programme requirements not merely courses in such areas as teaching methodology, educational psychology, and classroom management, but also courses in specific academic specialisation subjects. Thus, for instance, trainee teachers intending to teach primary or secondary school Science after they graduate may be required to read Physics or Chemistry as a degree specialisation while earning their teaching qualification. And trainee teachers intending to teach primary or secondary school English after they graduate are required to read a full suite of undergraduate theoretical and applied linguistics courses. The implicit assumption at our university (and other universities like ours which are devoted to teacher education) is that a good grounding in a relevant academic discipline will prepare trainee teachers for the teaching they will have to do in schools in the future. To make this specific to English Language Teaching, the implicit assumption is that the better theoretical understanding of how the English language works gained from such linguistics courses would make these course participants more effective English language teachers.

As a teacher educator in the field of English Language Teaching, it does not seem unreasonable to me to think that a solid diet of foundational linguistics courses (e.g. syntax, semantics, pragmatics, phonetics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, lexicology, functional grammar) would yield a linguistically-aware individual who would be more equipped to teach (about) the English language to young school pupils. But is this in fact the case? And do trainee teachers perceive this to be the case? Are trainee teachers able to make connections between the academic subject they study at the university ('linguistics') and the school curriculum subject they will teach in primary and secondary school classrooms (usually called 'English' in the Singapore school system)? Are they able to perceive the usefulness and relevance of their training in linguistics?

A search for literature on this issue reveals that surprisingly little research has been done in this area. To be sure, there are a few teacher educators who have sought to explore the relevance of applied linguistics to the teaching that English language teachers do in school classrooms (e.g. Burns and Knox 2005; Riegelhaupt and Carrasco 2005). And one study in particular is extremely illuminating – Edwards and Owen (2005) report on a study with trainee teachers enrolled in an MA TEFL programme who had been taught about language variation as part of a sociolinguistics course. Seeking to find out whether their trainee teachers considered that their instruction in language variation had 'usefully impinged on their professional practice' (45) and yet not wanting to advertise their intentions and run the risk of skewing their findings, Edwards and Owen surveyed the course participants on a large number of issues. On the issue of whether students were able to make connections between the content taught and pedagogical considerations, Edwards and Owen found that while some were able to articulate how particular aspects of the topic of language variation illuminated their English teaching, a few of their trainee teachers had no idea about what to do with the content information they learned.

Given, however, that the programme structures of whole English language teacher education programmes around the world are predicated on the belief that studies in applied linguistics really can play a part in enhancing the education of trainee teachers, and in equipping them to be better English language teachers in our schools, I think there is room for more research to be done which looks into the extent to which trainee teachers are able to perceive the usefulness of their linguistics training and are able to translate their training into informed classroom practices.

Edwards and Owen (2005) have said that they see their work 'as a contribution to, and reflection of, ongoing debates about the nature and purpose of applied linguistics' (57). This study follows in a similar vein, and represents the start of my investigations into the extent to which English language trainee teachers consider that their exposure to one area of Applied Linguistics – namely discourse analysis – might have an impact on their professional development and classroom practices.

### The study

This study was carried out at the National Institute of Education (NIE), a teacher training institute within the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. At the NIE, I work within the English Language and Literature department, and teach a discourse analysis course called *Analysing Text* to second year undergraduate trainee teachers majoring in English Language. This is a foundational linguistics course in which students / trainee teachers are introduced to different approaches to analysing spoken, written, and visual texts. Some of the topics we cover in the space of a 12 week semester include:

- different conceptions of 'text'
- genre-based view of texts
- Systemic Functional Grammar (focusing on analysis of Transitivity and Interpersonal features of texts)
- Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory
- Conversation Analysis
- the composition of visual texts (drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) grammar of visual design)

As I mentioned earlier, one of the biggest challenges that I have faced in teaching this course

to trainee teachers has been finding ways of encouraging these students to appreciate the *relevance* of text analysis to their lives, firstly, in terms of their future careers as teachers, and secondly, in terms of their own development as literate and thinking human beings. From the very beginning, I have been conscious of wanting to make sure that this text analysis course would not be shelved away in a corner of my students' minds and labelled merely as 'academic content'. My vision has been for this introduction to text analysis to open the students' eyes to the wider relevance of text analysis to their lives as teachers and as readers in the world at large, to bring them to a point where they start looking at the texts they encounter in the world around them through different eyes, and – more than that – realise that they *enjoy* being able to make sense of the inner workings of these texts. One way in which I have tried to accomplish this has been to pull into the classroom texts from their everyday lives – advertisements, road signs, movie posters, newspaper and magazine articles, comic strips, recipes, conversations they had with friends during lunch, emails, online shopping transactions, webpages – to make the familiar and taken-for-granted texts in their lives unfamiliar, interesting, and worthy of inspection. The discovery of the practical value and enjoyment of linguistic knowledge would, I have hoped, have a positive impact on how these trainee teachers approach the teaching of English in our primary and secondary schools in future.

In order to get a gauge of how well my vision was being accomplished in the course, and also to find out specifically the extent to which these trainee teachers felt that a semester's worth of analysing texts had any impact on their professional development and future classroom practices, I asked them to write a short reflection essay at the end of the semester. The trainee teachers had a choice of three questions to respond to:

1. In what ways do you think this introduction to text analysis might help you in your future teaching practice?
2. In what ways and to what extent have our discussions in this module changed the way you look at the texts around you?
3. What is the most practical or useful thing you have learned in this module?

After collecting their essays, I did a content analysis of all the reflections, to identify recurring themes in their responses. In the rest of this

article, I share some of what I learned about the extent to which these students found the study of text analysis to be relevant and useful.

### The results

These were the recurring themes that I found surfacing in multiple reflections:

*(1) The students said that the analysis of 'everyday texts' in class inspired them to analyse other texts they encountered in their everyday lives*

Focusing on our forays into Systemic Functional Linguistics, and in particular the weeks we spent on Transitivity analysis, a student wrote:

The use of community texts – the Rolex and National Washing machine ads made learning come alive to me. It was my first experience at deconstructing the kinds of processes and kinds of participants to discover the underlying ideology the producers of the texts constructed. ... I found myself motivated to uncover the realities advertisers set out to portray in the advertisements (banners) I came across on the streets and in print thereafter. It inspired me to apply what I learnt. This, to me, is the most rewarding experience. (Student W)

Another student found herself applying insights from Conversation Analysis while watching television:

... when watching an interview of Tyra Banks by Ryan Seacrest on Channel E!, I realized that even though Seacrest was the host of the show, Banks controlled the 'floor' and talked about things she wanted to talk about and she even asked Seacrest the questions. ... I could see that Seacrest attempted to regain his position as the host, but Banks did not give up the 'floor' for long. She interrupted Seacrest before he could finish saying what he wanted to say and even ignored some of his comments. ... I think if I had not undergone this module, I would not have been able to pick out such features in conversations. (Student S)

Yet another student, who had initially expressed skepticism at Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs), wrote in her reflection:

Recently, I have started to 'assess' and analyse my friends' speech by identifying the different FTAs in their utterances in my head. After examining my own utterances and those of others, I feel that the theory is not as crazy as I thought it was .... (Student Winnie See)

*(2) The students found themselves reading with a more critical eye*

The students reported that they stopped taking texts at face value, and began questioning what they read:

I have always had the idea that news reports are objective in that they provide impartial information. ... Through our discussions in this module, I learnt that they can help shape our view on the world through the manipulation of linguistic features. ... I am now very careful in reading news reports, especially those of CNN and BBC. I question myself when I am reading them: why are certain words used? Who is portrayed as the active participant and who is passive? Do the passive sentences serve the purpose of hiding agents? (Student SH)

I have become extremely critical about reading the 'Urban' supplement that comes with The Straits Times on Thursdays. ... I have slowly realized that what was meant to be leisure reading and entertainment, has instead been drumming the assumptions and values of society into my own beliefs and value systems. (Student Choo Ruofei)

*(3) The students felt that the theories introduced prompted them to examine their own language usage*

It was interesting to note that the students did not merely stop at analysing the English language that they encountered *around* them in their daily lives, but turned the critical lens on themselves as well:

Having learnt about the Politeness Theory has increased my level of sensitivity in speech because I become more aware of not just what I say but also, how I say it. (Student Winnie See)

Another surprising discovery for me was that texts actually convey interpersonal meaning ... I am more mindful of the way I write, especially in emails because I do not want to leave behind the wrong impression. (Student N)

Recording and listening to myself speaking with friends made me understand more about the deeper undercurrents that run through a simple conversation. ... [I]t was indeed meaningful to use CA to uncover different patterns of how humans interact with one another. I have definitely been more observant and sensitive during conversations now, seeing how I tend to overlap and self-speaker select most of the time. (Student B)

*(4) The students found that they now could understand and articulate the inner workings of texts*

One of my aims for the course was to equip the students with the metalanguage and the systematic frameworks with which to talk knowledgeably about a variety of different types of texts that they might encounter in the course of their lives and their teaching. From comments such as the following, this aim appeared to be accomplished:

I found that the topic on Conversation Analysis (CA) was very practical and useful. ... I felt that the examples Dr. Tang provided were interesting, especially the one recorded from the cooking program Saturday Kitchen. I watch a lot of such programs (such as Nigella, Forever Floyd, Just

Jamie etc) ... but I never noticed nor understood the dynamics between the hosts and their guests. In the lecture, Dr. Tang pointed out how the host, Antony Worrall Thompson, and his guest kept completing each other sentences. ... Now, I know there is a term to refer it to – the notion of projectability. (Student S)

*(5) The students wrote that they had come to a much broader understanding of the notion of 'text'*

One of my aims for the course was to encourage the trainee teachers in my class to notice the various kinds of 'texts' that were all around them, in every sphere of their lives. This, I felt, would help them not only to be more linguistically-aware, but also to be better equipped to make their English classes interesting and relevant to their school pupils in future. It was thus encouraging that several students wrote about how they had come to a broader understanding of the notion of 'text' through the course:

I will never look at text the same way again. Through this course, I have gained a new insight into the basic notion of 'text' itself, transcending my original perception that texts are merely words in print, to include 'anything that can be read, interpreted and analysed.' (Student Z)

The definitions of text which I was accustomed to and taught ... were 'any written material', 'the writing that forms the main part of a book, magazine etc, rather than the pictures or notes' and 'a book or other piece of writing that is connected with learning or intended for study' (Summers, 2003). There seemed to be no escaping from the notion that text equates some form of written material, i.e. words on paper. These, I realised after our discussions in this module, are extremely narrow views of texts. ... [T]he broad definitions of texts in fact encompass written texts, spoken texts and even visual texts like pictures. As a future teacher to be, I take heart in the fact that this module attempts to change our myopic definition of text. (Student C)

I had formerly always thought that texts had to be confined to something that was pre-meditated ... I could not have been more wrong. ... As conversations are generally not prepared beforehand, the analysis of spontaneous, raw speech was most appealing to me. (Student B)

I had always thought that text literally meant only words in print. When this module was first introduced, I was amazed that texts can comprise of pictures, movies, paintings, recordings, music and even a shopping mall. (Student Anny Tan)

Although responses such as those given above do not directly reveal the impact that the study of text analysis might have on these trainee teachers' future classroom practices, I would argue that they very importantly highlight an increased understanding and appreciation of how the English language works in everyday life, and I would suggest that this heightened awareness

bodes well for the professional development of these young teachers-to-be.

The next set of comments from the students relates directly to three different kinds of impact that the students felt this text analysis course would have on their future teaching:

*(6) The students said they felt inspired to teach about language (and about texts)*

I walk away from this module with a new pair of lens to see texts .... This is something I desire to bring back to my students in school. I want to teach them to see the power of language. To recognize that language is not dead as mere words in texts but alive indeed! (Student W)

... when I return back to teaching, I will not just read stories to my students solely for the sake of enjoyment or for teaching purposes such as the teaching of vocabulary and grammar. Instead, I wish to instill in them the love for critical thinking where they can enjoy a story based not just on its entertainment value but also to enjoy seeking out the 'hidden' ideologies and value systems intended by the writers for their readers. (Student G)

*(7) The students said that the course had equipped them with new skills, understandings, approaches, and methodologies for teaching subject content*

According to the Ministry of Education's English syllabus 2001, some of the aims of Singapore's English curriculum are for pupils to learn how to analyse and evaluate language and media as well as to read and view with critical appreciation, a wide range of texts, from print, non-print and electronic sources (Curriculum planning and development division, 2001). ... I feel that having been through a module of introduction to text analysis, it puts me in a much better position to teach pupils. (Student C)

Being aware of the concept of ideational meaning also helps students answer inferring questions for comprehension passages, and make better guesses at what their given text probably implies with the sort of realities created by its author. I have a hunch that students have difficulty in inferring [from] their text because they think it is the reality ... (Student Huang Xuwen)

*(8) The students felt that the course was useful in terms of helping them develop their communication and classroom management skills*

Learning about Conversation Analysis (CA) in AAE232 has unravelled a richer understanding of how my potential choice of register would affect my pedagogy and teacher-student relationship. ... [A]s I have learnt that adjacency pairs constraints what one can meaningfully respond, my questioning skills cannot be more significant. (Student Samuel See)

Personally, I feel that what has been most useful to my future teaching career has been ... Conversation Analysis. ... In my classroom in

future, it will be important for me to give students the opportunity to share their views or ideas, or in general, to give them a chance to talk. ... It is ... important that I learn to relinquish control of the 'floor', and allow my students their turn to speak. ... The study of the repair mechanisms allows me an alternative other than correcting the student outright, and instead, encourages the student to make other initiated repairs so as to facilitate the learning process. (Student Christer Tan)

I believe [Brown and Levinson's] theory would also affect the way in which I communicate with my students when I start teaching. ... The different strategies of doing FTAs also teaches me how to make FTAs less intimidating towards my students in future. (Student Winnie See)

### **Discussion: Does the study of discourse analysis make a difference?**

McCarthy (1991: 2) has said that 'discourse analysis is *not* a method for teaching languages; it is a way of describing and understanding how language is used'. From the time that I began teaching my text analysis course, I was concerned that my students would have difficulties seeing the relevance of what they were studying in my course for their future lives as school teachers, and I wanted to encourage them to make meaningful connections between what they were studying in the module and their lives beyond the university. This study then was conceived in order for me to get a gauge of whether my vision for this course was being realised. Specifically, I sought to find out the extent to which these trainee teachers consider that their exposure to discourse analysis might have an impact on their professional development and classroom practices.

Even from the brief content analysis that I have carried out on the students' end-of-semester reflection essays, I think we can see that the trainee teachers *are* making connections between their instruction in text analysis and their lives as teachers and readers outside the university walls. From the extracts presented above, we can see that a critical awareness about language and an interest in everyday texts are being developed in some of the students. They are becoming aware of the nuances in texts and how playing around with (or, to use a less innocent term, *manipulating*) language can create different effects and convey different meanings. I would suggest that this bodes well for the future pupils of these trainee teachers, because it is very difficult for an English teacher to make a child interested in language and texts if they are not themselves interested in probing and questioning language and texts.

The approach that I have adopted in my discourse analysis class is akin to what Brian Tomlinson (in Bolitho et al. 2003) calls the Language Awareness approach to teaching language. According to Tomlinson, a key element of this approach is that learners 'discover language for themselves' (Bolitho et al. 2003: 251), by asking questions about language, gathering data from the world at large, and from there, gaining insights into the way language works to convey meaning. This, if we think about it, is not so very different from what English teachers in schools have to try to develop in their pupils.

Along these lines, Bolitho (in Bolitho et al. 2003: 255) has reflected on the relationship between Language Awareness and models of teacher education, and has argued that

[t]rainee teachers need to be able to analyse language, to apply different strategies for thinking about language (analogizing, contrasting, substituting, etc.) in order to be able to plan lessons, to predict learners' difficulties, to answer their questions, and to write and evaluate materials. Only if they are able to think for themselves about language will they be able to do all this.

All this implies working within a model of teacher education which promotes independent and critical thinking.

Like Bolitho, my own very strong beliefs in this area are that part of the training that a trainee English teacher should receive is training in looking at language critically, training in thinking about texts analytically, and perhaps most importantly, I believe they should be given the opportunity to experience that doing these things can be enjoyable and meaningful.

From the literature, it would appear that trainee teachers will always see their teaching methodology modules as being the most relevant to their needs as future teachers, and this is understandable. However, I would argue that, for an English teacher-to-be, the gains to be had from the academic study of linguistics, though less immediately tangible, are no less important. The literature that emphasises the importance of academic subject study reports on benefits such as more interesting, adventurous, and effective teaching (McNamara, 1991) and a greater confidence in the classroom (Murphy, 2006). From the results of this small study that I have conducted, I would argue that we can add to this the suggestion that the study of *discourse analysis* in particular can result in

- a heightened language awareness,
- a more critical mindset,
- a greater appreciation and understanding of everyday texts,
- a better understanding of the kinds of things that can be taught about language,
- a renewed inspiration to teach the English language, and
- a greater sensitivity in communication.

This study clearly is just a first, exploratory step in investigating whether the study of one area of applied linguistics – namely discourse analysis – can have a real impact on the professional development and future classroom practices of trainee teachers. However, I think the results are promising, and there is much room for further work that looks into the extent to which a better theoretical understanding of how the English language works would help trainee teachers to develop into more effective English language teachers.

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