

## Enhancing Students' Schematic Construction of Authentic-Based Generic Discoursal Structuring

### Abstract

English language learners face many problems when processing the information especially in authentic contexts. This issue carries a great importance in pedagogy as a crucial point to have discourse competence. In this respect, this article reports on an experimental design which was conducted with 120 informants from the department of English (University of Mentouri Brothers-Constantine) divided into control and experimental groups in which learners of both groups were pre-tested and post-tested. The experiment checks the hypothetical criterion of testing the effect of the communicative nature of the authentic side of language on learners' schematic knowledge. Hence, it examines the aspect of enhancing learners' discourse competence via a rhetorically authentic contextualisation of language. This is more particularly entailed in the different contextual factors as guidelines for the authenticity of communication. The comparison of the pre-test and the post-test results reveals a remarkable enhancement in the students' schematic competence vis-à-vis the authentic use of language.

**Keywords:** Schematic knowledge, Discourse competence, Generic-based view, Discourse authenticity, Rhetorical-based view

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### ملخص

تعتبر الصفات البلاغية للنص من أهم المبادئ الأساسية لتحسين قدرة المتعلم على فهم أي نص. وفي هذا الصدد ومن أجل فهم عميق، يحتاج طلبة اللغة الانجليزية إلى تصور دقيق لسياق ما يقرؤون، ولا يتم ذلك إلا باعتبار نوعية الخطاب بجميع صفاته الوظيفية. يهدف هذا المقال إلى توضيح حاجة الطلبة إلى دراسة مختلف الخصائص الخطابية والتي تتمثل في العديد من الوظائف الأسلوبية والبنية اللغوية و الربط بين أفكار النص. ويسرد هذا البحث نتائج تجربة أجريت على 120 طالبا من السنة الثالثة قسم اللغة الانجليزية لمعرفة مدى تأثير تلك الخصائص الخطابية على الطلبة لكونها تساعد على تطوير القدرة الإدراكية للمتعلم.

### Introduction

Language as the main course of human communication represents different realizations of single or extended meaningful units. These units require a clear understanding on the part of the learner in order to practice the main contextual framework of language. This article shows the influence of the rhetorical property of discourse on learners' understanding. It focuses on the importance of enhancing learners' discourse competence or schema which, in turn, controls the way language, as form and

content, is used at the macro level. The main purpose of this study is derived from the fact that learners are not aware of the rhetorical features of language as determinants of meaning. The following sections describe the experimental study which was conducted in this respect and report on the main results obtained from the students' pre-test performance and post-test achievement.

### **1. Re-orientation towards Enhancing Learners' Discourse Competence : A Theoretical Framework**

The basic literature of discourse (cf. Coulthard, 1977; Brown and Yule, 1983; Nunan, 1993; McCarthy, 2001; Cook, 2003; Widdowson, 2007) agrees on the formula of discourse which works on the basis of a message to be communicated and realised through printed or spoken records. Language reflects not only the grammatical structure, but the rhetorical and functional treatments as well. In ensuring the latter considerations, the former can easily be acquired. Furthermore, Language as a communicative system, needs bridging the means to understand the form of communication between the sender and the receiver of the message. Since there is a progression in the description of language from system-oriented treatment to authentic context-dependent application, teachers should shift students' attention to more applicable orientation of language as part of the communicative competence of language users (Hymes, 1972). The focus should not be restricted to the description of the cohesive nature (Halliday and Hasan, 1976) of discourse to understand the communicative message, but on the whole communicative process based on psycholinguistic, cognitive, and rhetorical considerations.

Discourse is an exhaustive unit of meaning with certain communicative norms, but foreign language learners are not aware of such norms. Indeed, Malmkiaer and Williams (1998) agree that the network of communication implies a need to understand the way knowledge is built within the discursive unit. This view is reflected in the contextual communication which defines language choice in a given rhetorical property. Following this line of thought, there should be a focus on the importance of the contextual features of discourse as necessary markers to the author's communicative purpose. Indeed, they are important factors and components of learners' schematic knowledge. The latter is part of the psycholinguistic approach to reading besides it is: "learner-centered and places cognitive development and text processing at the core of its view on reading" (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000: 119). This cognitive view represents the way learners deal with the materials they encounter with during the process of learning whether their focus is dependent on their linguistic knowledge (vocabulary, grammar) in a bottom-up manner or their prior knowledge in a top-down treatment or even a combination of the two in an interactive view to process reading materials. This is very useful in authentic contexts in which authenticity, as it is stated by Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (*ibid.*: 195), implies two main directions: "the type of language used in the classroom or during the learning process, and the tasks employed while learning the language". Hence, learning the language from an authentic view represents the kind of processing which is applied during the "learning process".

Discourse comprehension and application open the way for a rhetorical reflection on different contextual realisations. This reflection draws our attention to the different applications of any piece of discourse in different communicative contexts, namely the

discourse genres. So, the piece of genre is a communicative reflection or as it is defined by Swales (1990: 58): "a class of communicative events". Genres can be used as learning tools to identify the communicative property of definite rhetorical features in terms of style, content, and form. This communicative property is considered as a key organisational factor of textual classifications and hierarchical taxonomies (Johns, 2002; Paltridge, 2002). Meaning in discourse varies according to the kind and purpose of the communicative event which reflects, in turn, various discourse genres, for example: 'emails', 'web pages', 'brochures', 'news 'bulletins', and 'stories' ... (etc.) (Cook, 2003).

So, the aim of this article is to enhance learners' schematic knowledge of the authentic and rhetorical identification of language. This is done via certain rhetorical properties such as: the *metadiscoursal activity*, *text typology*, *discourse functioning*, and *discourse global organisation or macrostructure*. *Metadiscourse markers* are tools that signal the progression of the ideas of discourse genre. Hyland (2003, 2004) classified them into interactive and interactional signals. The first clarifies the interrelatedness between the ideas of the piece of discourse or genre through transitions (moreover, however...), frame markers (first, second...), code glosses (for example, for instance, such as...), evidentials (x states that...), and endophoric markers (in section 1, see figure 3...). The second signals the relationship between the writer and the reader via hedges (perhaps, might...), boosters (in fact, indeed, definitely...), attitude markers (agree, disagree, unfortunately...), self-mentions (we, my, our...). These markers depend on the kind of genre characteristics which require the inclusion of all the signals or only some of them and learners can rely on them to interact with the writer.

Another effective way of teaching discourse structures especially in authentic contexts is through exposing learners to *text types*. Their integration is useful to introduce message structures. Recognising the typology of texts helps in extracting the nature and the structure of the communicative message. There are different text types: *description*, *argumentation*, *explanation*, *discussion*, *narrative*, *procedure*, *exposition*, *review*, and *report* ... (etc.). They are defined according to the purpose and the context of communication. For example, the academic article as a genre can take the form of *explanation*, *discussion*, and *argumentation*. A newspaper article also comprises the structure of *argumentation* or *Facts-Arguments-Explanation*, if it is an *editorial*, mainly, or a description depending on the kind of the article whether it is a *feature article* or a *hard news article*. By the same token, the specification of the typology of texts guides the reader to the *function* derived from the context of the communicative message whether the function of the text is *to describe*, *to argue*, *to explain*, *to discuss*, or *to review* ... (etc.). Hence, to describe the rhetorical property of any piece of discourse, there should be a consideration to the type of the conveyed message besides its functioning in the context of communication (McCarthy, 2001).

The next source of the rhetorical description is *the macrostructure* or the global organisation of the piece of genre. The whole organisation of the texts (macrostructure) is an essential property in which it is analysed and understood by the link between sentences. They are obvious in certain patterns that signal the progression of the different ideas of discourse. Any piece of discourse has a given organisation that characterises the kind of communicative message. For example, the recipe has the title of the meal and a list of ingredients. A newspaper article has a title, author, location,

argument, supporting details (Facts-Arguments-Explanation). An academic article comprises the structure of: abstract, introduction, problem, solution, conclusion; a narrative story (Setting-Complication-Resolution); an expository text (Situation-Problem-Solution-Evaluation), a political text (Claim-Counterclaim) (Nunan, 1993; Widdowson, 2007).

Thus, while processing knowledge, Learners should go through these components to deal with the rhetorical entity of the generic and authentic context. The previously mentioned features help in recognising the authentic realm of processing the whole communicative nature of discourse genres. Such recognition is captured with a consideration of all means of language description.

## **2. Design and Methodology**

Attempting to see the usefulness of this authentic and generic discursal-based view, an experimental design was conducted to show students the role of the rhetorical property of the authentic context of language. This is revealed through: inferring the author's purpose, assigning the whole organisation of the communicated message, analysing the stages of information, considering the metadiscourse markers, discourse typology, and discourse functions. This is done via an interactive view of information processing in a complimentary manner of top-down and bottom-up processing. In this scope, learners in the experimental procedure were exposed to materials of a written nature to describe and analyse their communicative property by assigning the stages of the propositional content of the relevant genres and inferring their purposes depending on the rhetorical property of discourse.

### **a. The Subjects:**

The subjects of the study were chosen from a total population of 385 third year undergraduate students from the department of English- University of Mentouri Brothers-Constantine, Applied Language Studies option. The choice of the third year level is due to the purpose of having students who have developed a certain background knowledge of the basic linguistic system or the main semantic-grammatical components of language. After this phase, they need a further consideration of the higher levels of language. As far as the sampling procedure is concerned, two groups are involved: a control group and an experimental group with **60 students** in each group resulting in a total of **120 students**. These students were pre-tested and post-tested. The pre-test and the post-test are aimed to examine students' understanding and manipulation of the rhetorical modes of discourse genres. The experiment took **5 months** of instruction (**almost a total of 35 sessions**) with a considerable number of practices of the issues covered in the classroom through: discourse typology (assigning the type of the reading materials), discourse functioning (the function of the text in accordance with its typology), discourse macrostructure (stages of information and the whole organisation), and the metadiscourse functions. These points are the main criteria dealt with in the treatment courses and observed through the pre-test performance and the post-test achievement. The next section explains better the treated materials along the period of the experiment.

### **b. The Treatment Materials**

The materials of the experiment focus on developing learners' ability to deal with the various features of the message to be communicated in the piece of genre. Since the

message is form and content, the treatment helps them to be aware of the message form features and the message content aspects for grasping the meaning. The students of the control group dealt with the basic linguistic features of texts cohesion from a theoretical view without practice (usually taught to introduce discourse analysis); while, students of the experimental group were exposed to a thorough rhetorical manipulation of language in a more authentic practical view. They dealt with **10 different genres**, more particularly, authentic ones such as: **7 newspaper articles, an introduction section in a sociology article, an abstract from a medical article, and an authentic text in the economic field**. The newspaper articles were chosen from two well-known and recognisable British and American newspapers, "The Times" and "The New York Times" respectively. Two kinds of newspaper articles were used in the treatment: news reports and editorial sections. The articles taken from the former selection are entitled: "*Britain Votes on Changes to Election System*" and "*Can Europe Be Saved?*" Concerning the headlines of the latter (editorials) are: "*Past, Present, and the Quantity of the Year*", "*A Lesson on Warming*", "*Copenhagen and Beyond*", "*Immigration's New Year*", and "*A Real Unnecessary Crisis for Families*". Hence, a great space in the treatment was devoted to editorials (called also opinion sections) because they represent an effective context for authentic discussions between students. Additionally, 2 part-genres (sections which are parts of whole genres e.g., parts from an academic article) were discussed in the course, one represents an introduction section extracted from a sociology article entitled: "*Prevention of Youth Violence: Why not Starting at the Beginning?*" and an abstract taken from an article in medical studies entitled: "*Regenerative Medicine: Past and Present*". Finally, an authentic text in the economic context was also used during the treatment which is entitled: "**How International Exchange Affects Americans: The Challenge from abroad**". Learners described these genres according to their rhetorical properties to gain skills of manipulation and to expand their discourse competence.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### a. The Control Group Pre-test Performance and Post-test Achievement

After correcting and scoring (scores out of 20), the students' pre-tests and post-tests, the following scores were recorded with their respective frequencies in terms of the previously stated criteria of evaluation (discourse typology, discourse functioning, discourse macrostructures, and metadiscourse functions):

Scores	Scores Frequency	Scores %
2	8	13.33
6	21	35
7	2	3.33
8	6	10
9	17	28.33
10	6	10
N	60	100

**Table 1:** Scores Frequency and Percentage of the Control Group Pre-test

Scores	Scores Frequency	Scores %
2	3	5
3	7	11.66
4	5	8.33
5	6	10
6	8	13.33
7	2	3.33
8	9	15
9	13	21.66
10	5	8.33
11	2	3.33
N	60	100

**Table 2:** Scores Frequency and Percentage of the Control Group Post-test  
The above scores can be summarised as follows:

	Scores total number	%
Control group below average Scores in the pre-test	50	83.33
Control group above average Scores in the pre-test	10	16.66
Control group below average Scores in the post-test	39	65
Control group above average Scores in the post-test	21	35

**Table 3:** Below and Above Average Scores of the Control Group Pre-test and Post-test.

When comparing the above results, we can observe that there is no big difference between the performance of the control group students in both the pre-test and the post-test. Indeed, 50 students or 83.33 % of the control group got below average scores in the pre-test with almost the same observation with 39 students (65 %) in the post-test. Additionally, from all the recorded scores, we can have the following means:

The Control Group	The Mean
The Control Group pre-test	6.95
The Control Group Post-test	6.66

**Table 4:** The Control Group Means in the Pre-test and the post-test

The control group means in both tests are the other proofs of what is observed. When counting the means (gathering all frequencies of scores/ the number of students), we record 6.95 for the pre-test and 6.66 for the post-test. So, we can notice that there is no significant improvement in the performance of the control group in the pre-test and the post-test. From this measurable performance, it was observed that learners fail to find the real communicative message of the discourse genres when relying on the rhetorical categorisation which is the most useful criterion for identifying the communicative message.

This proves that the control group did not develop enough discourse competence to manipulate with the various rhetorical properties of the discourse genres.

Now, Let us consider the results of the pre-test performance and the post-test achievement of the experimental group to measure what is achieved after the experimental treatment:

**a. The Experimental Group Pre-test Performance and Post-test Achievement**

The experimental group recorded the following results (scores with the relevant percentages) in the pre-test and the post-test:

Scores	Scores Frequency	Scores %
2	4	5
3	3	3.33
4	1	1.66
5	13	21.66
6	8	13.33
7	2	3.33
8	14	23.33
9	9	15
10	5	10
11	1	3.33
Total	N=60	100

**Table 5:** Scores Frequency and Percentage of the Experimental Group Pre-test

Scores	Scores Frequency	Scores %
6	2	3.33
7	4	6.66
8	2	3.33
9	6	10
10	5	8.33
11	4	6.66
12	6	10
13	6	10
14	8	13.33
15	10	16.66
16	2	3.33
17	3	5
18	2	3.33
Total	N=60	100

**Table 6:** Scores Frequency and Percentage of the Experimental Group Post-test  
From these results, we observe the following:

	Scores total number	%
<b>Experimental group below average Scores in the pre-test</b>	52	86.66
<b>Experimental group above average Scores in the pre-test</b>	8	13.33
<b>Experimental group below average Scores in the post-test</b>	14	23.33
<b>Experimental group above average Scores in the post-test</b>	46	76.66

**Table 7:** Below and Above Average Scores of the Experimental Group Pre-test and Post-test

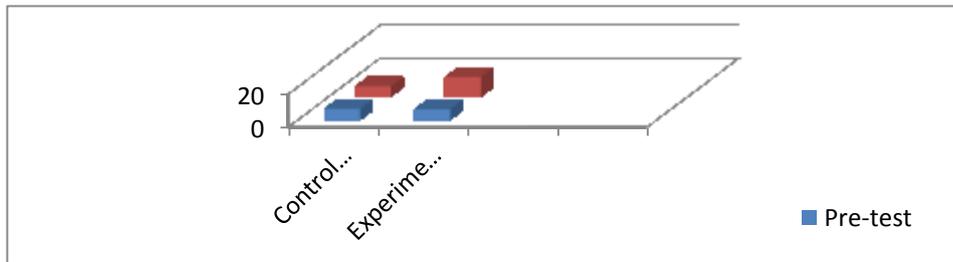
From the above tables, we can see that there is a significant improvement in the performance of the experimental group when comparing its pre-test and post-test results. In fact, only 8 students (13.33 %) of the experimental group got above average scores in the pre-test. However, 46 students (76.66 %) recorded above average scores in the post-test in which the scores reach 18 with a higher frequency of the score 15 (16.66 %) and then 14 (13.33) as shown in table 6. Now, let us consider the following table which summarises the means of the experimental group pre-test and post-test:

<b>The Experimental Group</b>	<b>The Mean</b>
The Experimental Group pre-test	6.70
The Experimental Group Post-test	12.25

**Table 8:** The Experimental Group Means in the Pre-test and the post-test

We can see from this table that the experimental group mean in the pre-test performance was 6.70 and became 12.25 in the post-test. Thus, we can notice a highly significant improvement in the experimental group performance after the experimental treatment. This means that the treatment enhances learners' discourse competence of the various rhetorical communicative properties of discourse genres.

To have a more visual characterisation of the results obtained, consider the following figure:



**Figure 1:** The Control Group and the Experimental Group Means in the Pre-test Performance and the Post-test Achievement

This figure shows clearly the level of the experimental group improvement, especially in the post-test in comparison with the control group performance. Thus, more particularly, the participants in this study were effective in their understanding of the main rhetorical property of the discourse genres (the treatment materials). Learners who focused on the direct guidelines derived and extracted from the discourse genres, they were more able to explain the different associations between the ideas of these genres. They gained a considerable command of manipulating with language in its authentic realm. So, after the treatment learners enhanced their schematic knowledge and got the necessary tools to deal with the authenticity of language.

#### **4. Pedagogical Implementations**

The application of discourse in its generic and authentic version has been proved to be a useful tool to enhance learners' discourse competency. This contribution can be done through the various rhetorical properties that guide through the propositional content of the piece of discourse genre. It is meant to make learners aware of the authenticity of language through a communicative manipulation, for instance, newspaper articles represent a valuable source of authentic communicative interactions and they are useful for students as learning tools in the classroom. This rhetorical manipulation of real language data (here the written variety) enhances learners' literacy and understanding of the communicative intention of the discourse content. Hence, this conceptualisation is based on the usefulness of the rhetorical perspective as an applicable notion to explain the discourse conveyed meaning. Through this, Learners should consider the various components of the communicative message that facilitate their exposure to other reading materials they encounter with during the learning process. This is considered an important complement of learners' knowledge which opens the way to describe and categorise how language is used in its discoursal property.

A further contribution implied in the integration of a generic-based view is in its usefulness in wider academic contexts. Dealing with the different purposes of discourses helps learners in their transferrable skills and formulate meaning depending on what they process in large contexts like academic and/ or authentic contexts. This view allows them to contribute in the process of understanding the communicative message.

#### **Conclusion**

This article shows the importance of examining the rhetorical-awareness raising of different authentic discursive contextual features and generic identifications of discourse functions, macrostructures, and metadiscourse markers. The learners' results proved that through these criteria, their discourse competence has been improved. This is considered as an important part of the generic-discoursal based view discussed in the article. Learners became more purposeful in identifying the authentic communicative message of the discourse genres. This view opens the way to consider discourse as a generic structure which represents given rhetorical properties as crucial contributions to language descriptions which in turn provide valid perspectives that guide learners

through the schematic competency of language units. Hence, this scope initiates learners to consider the rhetorically-generic contribution which deals with the whole message of communication in terms of structure, purpose, and function.

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