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A general overview into the role of Discourse Analysis (DA) in the Saudi Arabian Context

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Abstract

This is a literature review short paper attempting to address and investigate the role played by discourse analysis (DA) in the Saudi Arabian context mainly through academic settings. The study reveals that the Ministry of Education does benefit from the application of DA in various settings most notably in curriculum design. The paper also argues that more attention should be paid to the teaching DA at universities in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis; Saudi Education; EFL; Language Learning; Language Teaching

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Definitions of Discourse Analysis

1.1.1. Historical Background

In applied linguistics, the importance of language description is controversial from time to time. Focusing on the practical needs rather than theoretical insights. Subsequently, linguistics has detached from the view of prescriptive language (Liddicoat & Curnow, 2004). Applied linguistics is interdisciplinary field, such as phonetics, phonology, syntax, and semantic. One of the branches that relates to applied linguistics is discourse analysis. This scope encompasses a wide array of areas and still the least explicit domain in the field of applied linguistics (Flowerdew, 2023). Lomax (2004) argued that discourse analysis is not entirely associated with applied linguistics because of the discourse analysis diversity in different scope socially, politically, and culturally. Historically, discourse analysis as a term presented by the American linguist Zellig Harris in 1952 to examine and analyze what is beyond the spoken and written language (Paltridge, 2012). The real emerge of discourse analysis, on its current face, was in the early of 1970s, when many studies had been published in its first growing. As a result, two significant journals had manifested such as Discourse analysis and Text (Kaplan & Grabe, 2002). Kaplan and Grabe added that discourse analysis still nascent in the realm of linguistics studies and this domain ramified from the hermeneutics field that was originated centuries ago. The origins of discourse analysis extended from the traditional philosophy hermeneutics and phenomenology (Miles, 2010). He, additionally, discussed that discourse analysis is grounded in the domain of researcher methodology particularly the qualitative methods. This scientific approach deems as a process to scrutinize the language use and the social context.

1.2. Definitions of Discourse Analysis (DA)

A considerable amount of discourse analysis definitions has been formulated by experts, but before acquainting on the definitions, let us firstly drawing on the word discourse independently and how scholars define it. The border meaning of discourse (Flowerdew, 2023; Schiffrin et. al., 2001) defined discourse in three elements as the language in use, what

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is beyond the sentence, and social and ideological practices linked with the language. A salient difference is explained by (Gee, 2001) that Discourse with big 'D' it entails "the ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, believing, and using symbols, tools, and objects in the right places and at the right times" integrating these with the language to present certain meaning about one society. While discourse with little 'd', Gee formulated it as what the language in use means or outlines of language such as conversations or stories. Lomax (2004) defined that discourse analysis "as the study of language viewed communicatively and/or of communication viewed linguistically …. a definition typically involves reference to concepts of language in use, language above or beyond the sentence, language as meaning in interaction, and language in situational and cultural context." (Paltridge, 2012) delineated the definition of discourse analysis as "what people mean by what they say, how they work out what people mean, and the way language presents different views of the world of different understandings".

It regards as the connection between language and the social and the cultural contexts. Discourse analysis is the investigation of life socially by analyzing language in a broad context including head-on talk, gesture-based interaction, visual and written materials (Shaw & Bailey, 2009). Gee (2001) coined thread of elements interrelating as a network, in turn, discourse analysis concentrates on. He named these elements as six building tasks as follows: semiotic building, world building, activity building, socioculturally situated identity and relationship building, political building, and connection building. Based on the previous explanations of discourse analysis definitions, there is a consensus among experts that discourse analysis demonstrates what is beyond spoken or written language, besides other factors which affect the conveyed meaning such as cultural or traditional features of the society.

1.3. Types of DA

Discourse as an abstract term is widely utilized in various fields (Miles, 2010). He added that discourse analysis is primarily applied through two methods. The first is language in use which focuses on specific aspects of the language such as grammatical structures and their interaction with the social context. while the other one is the socio-political approach. While the other one is socio-political approach, which delve into the effectiveness of the social context in which it shapes the language. Miles explained that discourse analysis included in social and applied sciences in sociology, psychology, cultural studies, and linguistics. Scholars in the social science argued that discourse analysis is largely correlates with their work (Paltridge, 2012). On the other side, Lomax (2004) stated that an abundance of the discourse analysis is carried out by linguists rather than experts in other disciplines. Certain studies reformulated the discourse analysis types in different way based on the field is engaged in. Flowerdew (2023) mentioned that the facets to use the discourse analysis are three as follows: Textual which concentrates on the academic discourse as representing in the language options, the second is correlated with media and political discourse which is called critical discourse analysis, the last is the contextual one which focuses on the sociolinguistics domain. Even the visuals which are correlated with words in texts are engaged in discourse analysis. According to (Paltridge, 2012), different modes of multimodal such as videos, pictures films, sounds, and images are integrated cohesively with written texts to create the meaning.

2. Why Discourses Analysis is Significant?

Discourse analysis is a significant field of study as it allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the social reality and power dynamics that shape our world. Discourse refers to any form of communication that occurs within a social context, including written, spoken, and visual communication. It is through discourse that people construct their understanding of the world and negotiate their place within it. One of the main advantages of discourse analysis is its interdisciplinary nature. It is used in a variety of disciplines, including sociology, linguistics, anthropology, media studies, and political science. This allows researchers to draw on a range of theoretical and methodological approaches to analyze discourse in different contexts. Discourse analysis is used when researchers seek to understand the deeper meanings and social implications of language use. It allows researchers to examine how language use constructs and reinforces power relations within society. For example, a discourse analysis of media coverage of political candidates can reveal how different candidates are constructed as either competent or incompetent based on their gender, race, or other social identities. Additionally, discourse analysis helps in making informed decisions by providing a critical understanding of language use and its consequences. For example, a discourse analysis of public health campaigns can reveal how messaging around health behaviors can stigmatize certain groups or reinforce harmful stereotypes.

2.1. What is the Purpose of DA

One of the main purposes of discourse analysis is to examine power relations within society. Language is not neutral; it carries social meanings, ideologies, and power dynamics. By analyzing discourse, researchers can identify how power is constructed, maintained, and challenged through language use. For example, in political discourse, the language used by leaders and politicians can shape public opinion and influence decision-making processes. Discourse analysis helps

uncover the strategies and tactics employed to gain and exercise power through language. Another purpose of discourse analysis is to understand social identities and their construction through language. Language plays a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing social identities such as gender, race, and class. By examining how language is used in different contexts, discourse analysis allows researchers to understand how social identities are constructed, negotiated, and contested. For instance, analyzing media discourse can reveal how certain groups are represented and marginalized, perpetuating stereotypes and inequalities. Discourse analysis also serves the purpose of informing decision-making processes. By critically examining language use, policymakers, educators, and other professionals can gain insights into the potential consequences of specific discourses. For example, analyzing political speeches can inform voters about the ideologies and policy priorities of candidates, enabling them to make informed decisions. In education, discourse analysis can help identify biases and inequalities in teaching materials and practices, leading to more inclusive and equitable education systems.

2.2. When to Apply DA

One key application of discourse analysis is in the field of sociology. Discourse analysis allows sociologists to examine how social structures, norms, and power dynamics are reproduced and contested through language. For example, in a study on gender inequality, discourse analysis can reveal how gendered ideologies are embedded in everyday language, reinforcing unequal power relations between men and women. By dissecting linguistic choices, discursive strategies, and rhetorical devices, discourse analysis can uncover the discursive practices that contribute to the perpetuation of inequality, enabling researchers to challenge dominant discourses and advocate for social change. Discourse analysis is also valuable in the field of political science and international relations. It can help researchers understand how political actors use language to construct and legitimize certain policies and ideologies. For instance, in the analysis of political speeches or media discourses, discourse analysis can unveil the discursive techniques employed by politicians to shape public opinion and maintain their authority. By critically examining the language used in political contexts, discourse analysis can provide insights into the power dynamics at play and the potential implications of specific discourses on policymaking and public opinion. Furthermore, discourse analysis is relevant in educational research and pedagogy. It can shed light on how language is used in educational settings to reproduce or challenge social hierarchies and inequalities. For instance, by analyzing classroom interactions or educational policies, discourse analysis can uncover the ways in which language is used to marginalize certain student groups or perpetuate stereotypes. This understanding can inform educational practices and policies aimed at creating more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

2.3. How Can DA Help?

In the field of politics, discourse analysis can unveil the discursive techniques employed by politicians to shape public opinion and maintain their authority. By analyzing political speeches, interviews, and media coverage, researchers can identify the strategies used to construct narratives, frame issues, and influence public perception. This understanding can inform citizens and policymakers about the hidden agendas and manipulative tactics employed by politicians. In the realm of education, discourse analysis can shed light on how language is used to reproduce or challenge social hierarchies and inequalities in educational settings. By examining classroom interactions, textbooks, and educational policies, researchers can identify the ways in which language is used to marginalize certain groups or perpetuate stereotypes. Discourse analysis can reveal the hidden assumptions and biases embedded in educational materials, enabling educators to develop more inclusive and equitable teaching practices. Moreover, discourse analysis is also valuable in sociology, as it helps uncover hidden meanings, ideologies, and social identities constructed through language. By analyzing interviews, focus groups, and online forums, researchers can understand how individuals negotiate their identities and construct social realities through language.

2.4. Possible Shortcomings of Discourse Analysis

One of the main criticisms of discourse analysis is its subjectivity in interpretation. Since discourse analysis involves the analysis of language and meaning, it requires researchers to interpret and make sense of the data. This interpretation process can be influenced by the researcher's own biases, perspectives, and preconceived notions. Different researchers may interpret the same discourse differently, leading to potential disagreements and inconsistencies in findings. This subjectivity challenges the objectivity and reliability of discourse analysis as a research methodology. Additionally, discourse analysis can be a time-consuming process, especially when dealing with large amounts of data. Analyzing discourse involves transcribing and coding data, identifying patterns and themes, and interpreting the findings. This process requires meticulous attention to detail and can be time-intensive. Researchers may spend significant amounts of time analyzing a single text or conversation, which limits the feasibility of conducting discourse analysis on a large scale. This time constraint can hinder the ability to generalize findings and limits the scope of research. Furthermore, discourse analysis often focuses on language and textual data, neglecting other forms of communication such as non-verbal cues or visual representations. Language is just one aspect of human communication, and by solely focusing on

language, discourse analysis may overlook important contextual elements that influence meaning and interpretation. This limitation can lead to a partial understanding of social phenomena and restrict the scope of analysis. Despite these shortcomings, discourse analysis remains a valuable research methodology that contributes to knowledge production and challenges dominant discourses. Researchers can mitigate the subjectivity in interpretation by employing rigorous analytical frameworks and engaging in reflexive practices. By openly acknowledging their biases and engaging in critical reflection, researchers can enhance the validity and reliability of their findings.

3. Applications of Discourses Analysis in Saudi Arabia

3.1. Versatility of DA

Discourse Analysis can help give an insight about several factors as it aids a better understanding of the world, it can be used in different fields such as linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, communication, education, and other fields. It provides explanations and interpretations of aspects of social life by identifying the reasons for social wrongs and producing knowledge that can mitigate these wrongs. These interpretations include the analysis of discourses produced by those people who seek to regulate or govern a particular area of society. Discourse analysis is more prominent in the area of applied linguistics related to language and education (Blackwell, 2004, p. 151). Discourse Analysis shows how particular discourses can be used to shape behaviour, by way of development of a dominant meaning; it shows the importance of the overall context as well as it affords the advantage of a multidisciplinary perspective. It can also be in relation to behaviourist and cognitivist approaches, discourse is not just a product of a person's cognitive and mental state. Thinking makes use of concepts, and concepts are by definition in the public domain, influenced by a broad range of social and intellectual factors. Discourse analysis is also influenced by social constructionism: people and their doings are not "natural observable facts" but are constantly shaped by the society around them.

3.2. Examples of DA Applications in Saudi Arabia

Applications of discourse analysis can be seen in multiple contexts, as a way to explain the social, political, cultural and historical meanings of language or a type of communication. With the vision of Saudi Arabia 2030, many changes have happened on an industrial level as well as on a societal level, one of the goals of the 2030 vision was in enforcing women in the society, in 2018 women were allowed issue driving licenses in Saudi Arabia, this at the time inspired a debate in various social media platforms, many saw this as a contrary to traditional religious life, where others saw this as giving women their rights. We can conduct from this example that societies differ in on what is eligible or illegible, we can see that social media influence society, as it can be used to express one's feelings and engaging with others on different topics.

4. Conclusion: Who Benefits from DA in Saudi Arabia?

There are a multitude of stakeholders who might benefit from discourse analysis in Saudi Arabia including, but not limited to, the government, various educational organizations, and alike.

The stakeholders here are, like many other disciplines, are fluid and dynamic, by which we mean they keep changing and evolving as the needs change and evolve themselves.

However, as far the basic concept of discourse analysis itself is concerned, the beneficiaries can be categorized into two main groups, the private sector as in private schools, organizations and institutes, and more significantly, the government represented here by ministries, schools, universities and various educational authorities. The latter in our opinion is more significant because the government retains the powers to enforce such things as policies influenced and shaped by DA. As the literature review above shows, there are various and genuine opportunities to implement the findings of DA into things such as curriculum design, criminology, surveys, public opinions, to mention but a few.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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