Top-down Approach to Developing Extended Discourse in Students’ Speech

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I. Introduction

A general consensus among Chinese language instructors at the more advanced levels has been that developing extended discourse in students’ speech should be one of the instructional objectives. Nevertheless, there have been very few discussions on how to achieve that goal. This paper reports a number of pedagogical implementations that are top-down in nature in my third- and fourth-year Chinese classes at Williams College, designed to provide scaffolding for the students to develop extended and coherent speech and at the same time providing the opportunity for the instructors to probe into students’ reading comprehension and their command over the new linguistic expressions.

Chinese language teaching at the more advanced levels, such as third- and fourth-year levels, have long been recognized as challenging to many Chinese language educators for various reasons. First, textbook language at these levels is transitioning into more literary expressions (書面語) from day-to-day style speech. Secondly, content of the lessons are often more closely related to the culture/society of the target language and may be less familiar to the students than that of the lessons from typical first- and second-year level textbooks, which often draw on the personal experiences of the learners. In other words, students are faced with unfamiliarity of the text both in terms of linguistic expressions and in terms of content, two primary sources of reading difficulty noted in numerous reading studies for both first- and second-year language learners (Hudson, 1982; Clarke, 1988; Carrell, 1983, 1984, 1987; Chang, 2004). For the reasons stated above, obstacles created by these two types of unfamiliarity might be more salient for the students in their third- or fourth-year Chinese classes than for those in the first- or second-year classes. Checking students’ comprehension of what they read is thus of particular importance at this stage because, first of all, these students are not merely ‘learning to read’ but also ‘reading to learn’; and secondly, discussion of the text content, a very important component in advanced-level language courses and an essential way for developing students’ ability in critical reasoning, relies on proper comprehension of the text they read.

Before going into detail about the specific implementations, it is necessary to explicate what I mean by ‘top-down’ approach. In a very general sense, top-down approach could be broadly defined as the attitude or methodology toward the task at hand from a global or macro-level perspective. Opposite the top-down approach is the ‘bottom-up’ approach, which focuses on the building-block elements or elements at the micro-level of a task. In terms of reading, the characteristics of a top-down approach include using one’s world knowledge or familiarity with the text content and text structure to orchestrate the selection of lower-level processing strategies, such as decoding of words and interpretation of phrases, to ensure appropriate comprehension (Goodman 1967, 1970; Smith 1971). The ‘bottom-up’ approach, on the other hand, refers to readers’ attention to the linguistic information encoded in the print to process the text by first decoding each individual word, then grouping individual words into sentences, and finally extending sentences into discourses (Gough, 1972). In this view, comprehension is assumed to take place automatically as long as the reader goes through all the necessary stages successfully in the reading process.

Analogous to the distinction between the ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approach in reading research, the ‘top-down’ approach in actual classroom teaching could be understood as an instructional approach that aims at providing scaffolding for the students to develop discourse-level speeches that are structurally coherent and pragmatically accurate, whereas the ‘bottom-up’ approach centers instruction around activities designed to ensure students’ command over linguistic forms at the local level, such as vocabulary and sentence patterns.
The philosophy of learning as manifested in the teaching practices in a more traditional foreign language classroom often reflects the characteristics of the ‘bottom-up’ approach, especially in terms of the pedagogical considerations given to the design of instructional sequence. Specifically, vocabulary and sentence patterns are viewed as building blocks for full acquisition of the text to be learned, the practice of which often constitutes a big proportion of the classroom instruction. In advanced-level Chinese courses, such as the third- and fourth-year courses, it is not uncommon to find the language instructor still spending a great deal of time in the classroom, first doing drilling activities designed to practice vocabulary and sentence patterns and leaving only a small portion of time at the end for discussion and other activities that promote global processing, or making sure that students are using what they have learned in context appropriate ways.

If one of the goals of advanced-level language courses is to train the students to produce extended speech, there must be plenty of opportunities in the classroom for them to do so. The problem with the bottom-up approach to language teaching in this regard lies in the scant emphasis it puts on providing such an opportunity. To redress this situation, I have implemented two practices in my third- and fourth-year Chinese classes at Williams that are top-down in nature: providing a worksheet for oral summary and encouraging the use of discourse devices, stock phrases and formulaic speeches in students’ oral output. In the following sections, I will describe the practices in detail and the theoretical grounding for such implementations.

II. Top-down Approaches and Their Theoretical Grounding

1. Worksheet and Oral Summary

In the third- and forth-year Chinese classes at Williams College, I usually start out the lesson by randomly asking a few students to give a detailed oral summary of the text content to be covered that day, followed by a few more students adding whatever has been left out. Given the fact that the class size typically runs between five to eight students, more than 70% of the students get to talk in extended discourse in the first fifteen minutes of the class immediately. Also, in order to ensure that their summaries are coherent thematically and structurally, I supply the students with a worksheet containing an outline of the text content to aid their reading comprehension, and to help them organize their summaries. (See appendix A.) This activity serves three purposes:

   1. To direct students’ attention to text structure;
   2. To provide the students with an opportunity to bring their speech to the discourse level coherently;
   3. To allow the instructor to check the students’ comprehension of the text through their summary and probe into possible areas of comprehension difficulty.

The importance of text structure to comprehension has long been recognized by researchers in various fields, such as cognitive science and education (Bai, 1997; Jin 2004a). On the other hand, recent research has also shown that learners of Chinese at the third-year level still focused on individual characters, words, or phrases when they process reading passages and paid little attention to the relationships between paragraphs and text structure (Chang, 2004). It is thus imperative that we start to look for ways to direct our students’ attention to text structure whenever we can. A worksheet with an outline of the text structure is a very reasonable starting point. Eventually, the need for a worksheet should diminish as students develop keener awareness of the importance of text structure and fully utilize it as a strategy for reading comprehension.

When basing their summary on such a worksheet, students’ speech should be more coherent when the text is fully comprehended. On the other hand, when comprehension fails, their summary should also reflect the areas of comprehension problems more precisely, thereby providing the instructor more direct access to those areas for subsequent explanations.
Finally, this author feels that, in every possible way, the activity of oral summary should be carried out before practice on specific linguistic units, for it not only forces the students to be fully prepared for the class but also highlights and brings to a more conscious level the importance of using text structure as a learning strategy.

2. Discourse Devices, Stock Phrases, and Formulaic Speeches

Discourse devices are rhetorical devices that people use to achieve specific functions, such as making apologies or requests, showing total/partial agreement, making suggestions or conclusions, etc. Two examples of discourse devices are ‘你說的話對是對，可是⋯⋯’ , ‘你說的話有一定的道理，可是⋯⋯’ for showing partial agreement. (See Appendix B for more examples.) Besides the specific functions they serve, discourse devices also provide smoother transition between speech segments and can unite fragments of speeches into a coherent discourse, either in discussions that involve several people or in making personal statements. Stock phrases, on the other hand, are phrases that are viewed almost as fixed expressions due to the close relationship of collocation between its elements. Examples of stock phrases include ‘教育水平’, ‘社會地位’, ‘提高水準’, ‘提高地位’, etc.

Both discourse devices and stock phrases can be considered ‘formulaic speeches’ (Hatch, 1983; Jin, 2004b) in that they can be learned as an entire unit and require little cognitive resources for processing. This specific characteristic about formulaic speech contributes greatly to second language acquisition in several ways. First, according to the capacity hypothesis (Just and Carpenter, 1992), each person has a limited amount of processing resources available at any time during processing, and various cognitive processes compete for this limited amount of resources. By using formulaic speech in their own discourse, students can devote the cognitive resources available to various processing activities with more flexibility, which ultimately facilitate their acquisition of the target language.

Furthermore, closely related to the capacity hypothesis, research studies on human capacity for planning speech has shown that speakers plan the lexical content of novel utterances in chunks no larger than one independent clause at a time, thus the one-clause-at-a-time hypothesis (Pawley and Syder, 1983a; Pawley and Syder, 2000). It is argued that, unlike written texts, conversational utterances are created for the moment. The utterances are thus under the constraint of two factors: the social context and biological limits of what the mind can do at speed. While the former calls for specific prepackaged conventional expressions (formulaic speech), the latter also favors the use of these expressions for the sake of budgeting limited processing capacity. Eventually, it is knowledge of conventional expressions that gives speakers the means to escape from the one-clause-at-a-time constraint and provides the key to nativelike fluency.

Consequently, in addition to oral summary in each class when lesson content is to be covered, I also allocate an entire class for discussion of each lesson. For the discussion classes, students are required to prepare a three-minute speech for the discussion topics. A detailed instruction sheet is given to the students prior to the class, in which important vocabulary, stock phrases, and sentence patterns are highlighted for students to incorporate into their speeches. (See Appendix C.)

Since the purpose of having discussion classes is to provide the students an opportunity to react to the lesson content whereby they develop their skills in producing spontaneous discourse that is linguistically accurate and contextually appropriate, a list of discourse devices was also given to the students at the beginning of the fall semester to facilitate such development. The degree to which the students actively and appropriately use the discourse devices in their speech is a constant criterion for the evaluation of their oral performance.

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3 The author recognizes that summarizing text orally can take up a lot of time in the class and may not be an ideal practice in large classes, for students who are not doing the summary might lose their attention as a result. It is recommended that each instructor evaluate their own teaching situation in order to decide when and how to implement this practice in their teaching.
III. Conclusion

The practices designed to develop extended discourse in students’ speech described in this paper are considered top-down in two ways. In terms of instructional sequence, oral summary that is organized based on the text outline provided by the worksheet precedes the classroom practice on linguistic units, reflecting an instructional approach that emphasizes global processing over local processing. Furthermore, use of discourse devices, stock phrases, and formulaic speech provides scaffolding from a top-down perspective to facilitate the process of creating coherent and comprehensive output by the students. Both practices are supported by results from empirical studies and have great utility not only in developing extended discourse in students’ speech but also in improving their oral fluency. It is hoped that colleagues in the field of Chinese teaching recognize the merit of these practices so as to further refine their applications in classroom instruction in different settings.

Reference

Appendix A

《现代化与知识分子》Worksheet#2

1. 费孝通说中国的知识分子有哪些特点？

    共同的特点:

    不同的特点:

    老年知识分子:
    1. 第一种老年知识分子(65岁以上):
    2. 第二种老年知识分子(60岁左右):

    中年知识分子(1949年以后培养的知识分子)
    1. 第一种中年知识分子(1949-1957上大学的):
    2. 第二种中年知识分子(1957-1966上大学的):
    3. 第三种中年知识分子(1966以后进大学的)

2. 费孝通说中国知识分子有哪些问题？为什么中年知识分子的问题最应该先得到解决？
Devices for making coherent discourse (篇章用语)

A. For showing agreement:
1. 我非常同意你所说的。
2. 我觉得你说的话很有道理。

B. For showing total disagreement:
1. 我(完全)不同意你所说的。
2. 我对你所说的(非常)不以为然。

C. For showing partial disagreement:
1. 你说的对是，可是.....
2. 你的看法有一定的道理，但是......

D. For making suggestions:
1. .... 也许应该......
2. 我们是不是 xxx 比较好？

E. For making conclusions:
1. 总而言之
2. 总之

F. For questioning:
1. 我想请问X, ..... 
2. 刚才X说的, 我还不太清楚, 能不能请X 再说明一下.

G. For turn-taking:
1. 刚才 X 说了....., 现在 .......... 
2. 刚才我们听了X 意见, 下面我们请Y 发表一下他的看法.

H. For making a list:
1. 首先.....其次......然后 .....最后 ..... 

I. For giving example:
1. 拿.....来说

J. To relate an issue to someone:
1. 对 ..... 来讲
读书无用吗？

在11月10日，我们要讨论和「读书无用论」有关的一些问题，主持人得选一个问题来准备一段2分钟的内容，其他人得为每一个问题都准备一段3分钟的内容。

背景(Background):

1. 在中国知识分子的生活水平太低。
2. 八十年代中国的高级技术人员（如工程师）以及老师都赚不了什么钱，所以很多人不愿意再读书了。
3. 「万般皆下品，唯有读书高」--在中国和许多亚洲国家都有这样的观念，认为知识分子的地位比其他工作高得多，认为一个人的学历越高，社会地位就越高。

问题(Question):

1. 你对「唯有读书高」和「读书无用论」这两种说法，有什么看法？在美国和你自己国家，情况怎么样呢？
2. 知识分子的生活水平对社会发展有什么影响？你认为政府应该怎么改善这个问题？

讨论的时候，每个人都必须专心听其他人说的话，然后对其他人说的话表示自己的看法。说话的时候，尽量用到下面的句子和词：

【发生变化；专门人才；培养；待遇；……为……作出贡献；据我所知，……；……（还）不如……；别说……，就是……也……；可是把话说回来，……；如果我的了解正确的话，……】