

EXPLORING TEXTS TO INVENT MEANING FROM EVIDENCE: A DISCOURSE-BASED APPROACH TO READING

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Abstract: Understanding a text is not simply a matter of interpreting words and grammar. Readers actively construct meaning by drawing on linguistic, contextual, and cultural evidence. This article explores how learners infer meaning from texts, even when they do not know the language or writing system. Drawing on principles of discourse analysis and classroom activities adapted from Thornbury (2005), the paper demonstrates how texts serve as rich sources of linguistic and cultural information. Practical activities are presented to help learners develop strategies for interpreting texts, identifying patterns, and making evidence-based inferences.

Keywords: text, discourse analysis, reading strategies, inference, context, hieroglyphs, meaning-making

Introduction

Traditional language teaching often emphasizes grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation as the primary components of language learning. However, discourse analysts argue that language is best understood through connected texts rather than isolated words or sentences (Thornbury, 2005). Texts provide meaningful contexts in which linguistic forms interact with social, cultural, and communicative purposes.

The ability to understand a text involves much more than recognizing individual words. Readers continuously use clues from the text, its structure, and its context to construct meaning. As Sweet (1899, as cited in Thornbury, 2005) argued more than a century ago, connected texts form the foundation of language learning because they present language in natural and meaningful contexts.

This article examines the notion of text, discusses strategies readers use to interpret unfamiliar texts, and presents practical classroom activities that encourage learners to explore how meaning is constructed from evidence.

The Notion and Origin of Text

The term *text* originates from the Latin word *textus*, meaning “woven fabric,” suggesting that a text consists of interconnected linguistic elements woven together to create meaning. In linguistic studies, a text is generally defined as any spoken or written stretch of language that forms a meaningful whole (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

Long before the invention of modern writing systems, humans communicated through symbols, drawings, oral narratives, and ritual performances. Ancient civilizations such as those of Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, and Greece developed various forms of texts, including religious inscriptions, legal codes, historical records, and literary works. These texts not only transmitted information but also preserved cultural knowledge and social values.

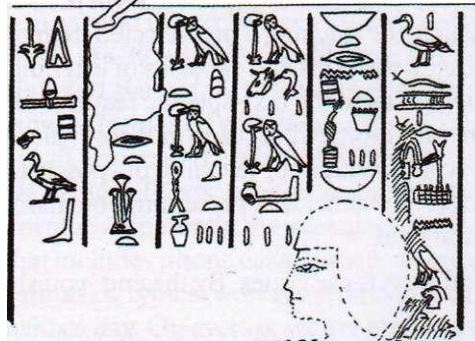
Among the earliest examples are Egyptian hieroglyphic texts, which combined pictorial symbols, phonetic signs, and semantic markers. Their complexity illustrates that understanding a text often requires more than simply identifying individual signs.

Inventing Meaning from Evidence

One of the most fascinating aspects of reading is the human ability to infer meaning from limited



information. Thornbury (2005) illustrates this through an activity involving an ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic inscription.



When learners observe a hieroglyphic text without knowing Ancient Egyptian, they naturally begin searching for patterns. Repeated images of birds, plants, or geometric symbols encourage readers to form hypotheses about the text's meaning. Initially, they may assume that each symbol directly represents an object. However, early scholars attempting to decipher hieroglyphs discovered that many symbols functioned as phonograms rather than pictographs.

Readers also rely on contextual clues. Knowing that a text was found in a tomb may lead them to infer that it contains religious content, a prayer, or a biography of the deceased. Such reasoning demonstrates the use of a top-down reading strategy, where prior knowledge and contextual information guide interpretation.

In this process, readers draw on at least three sources of evidence:

The signs themselves (words, symbols, images);

Patterns within the text (repetition, organization, structure);

The context in which the text appears.

These clues help readers generate inferences about word meanings, text types, and communicative purposes (Thornbury, 2005).

Reading Strategies and Text Interpretation

Effective readers employ multiple strategies depending on their goals and the nature of the text.

Top-Down Processing

Top-down processing involves using background knowledge, experience, and contextual information to predict meaning. Readers begin with general assumptions and then confirm or modify them as they gather textual evidence.

For example, knowing that a text comes from a newspaper helps readers anticipate journalistic language, factual reporting, and specific discourse conventions.

Bottom-Up Processing

Bottom-up processing focuses on decoding linguistic elements such as words, grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure. Readers gradually build meaning from smaller units toward a larger understanding.

In practice, successful reading combines both approaches. Skilled readers move flexibly between textual details and broader contextual understanding.

What Makes a Text Difficult?

Learners often associate reading difficulty with unfamiliar vocabulary. However, research and classroom experience suggest that comprehension difficulties may arise from several sources, including:

Unknown vocabulary;

Complex grammatical structures;



Lack of background knowledge;
Unfamiliar text organization;
Cultural references;
Implicit meanings.

Consider the newspaper headline:

“Police dog sacked after biting innocent man.”

Although some readers may not know every word, many can understand the general message through contextual clues. The text illustrates how readers often infer meaning even when vocabulary knowledge is incomplete.

Classroom discussions reveal varying perceptions of difficulty. Some learners focus on vocabulary, while others struggle with content or grammatical complexity. Such responses demonstrate that reading comprehension is a dynamic interaction between the text and the reader's knowledge.

Beyond Grammar: Text as a Resource for Language Learning

Texts provide opportunities to observe how language functions in authentic communication. A short poem, for example, can reveal numerous aspects of English grammar and discourse:

*Have you forgotten the way to my hut?
Every evening I wait for the sound of your footsteps,
But you do not appear.*

Even this brief text contains:

- Various parts of speech;
- Different verb forms and tenses;
- Question and negative sentence structures;
- Noun, verb, and prepositional phrases;
- Cohesive devices such as repetition and conjunctions

The repeated use of *you* creates cohesion, while the conjunction *but* signals contrast. Such features demonstrate how texts organize meaning beyond individual sentences (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

Thornbury (2005) argues that texts offer valuable opportunities for learners to explore phonology, vocabulary, grammar, orthography, and discourse simultaneously. Therefore, texts should be viewed not merely as reading materials but as rich linguistic resources.

Practical Classroom Applications

The activities adapted from Thornbury's work encourage learners to become active meaning-makers rather than passive recipients of information.

Activity 1: Deciphering Ancient Texts

Students examine an unfamiliar hieroglyphic text and identify recurring symbols and patterns. They discuss possible meanings and justify their interpretations using evidence from the text and context.

Activity 2: Reading News Reports

Students read a short newspaper article and discuss factors that make the text easy or difficult. They summarize the article in simpler language and identify how grammar contributes to meaning.

Activity 3: Unpacking a Poem

Students analyze a short poem by identifying:

Parts of speech;
Clauses and sentences;



Phrase structures;
Grammatical patterns;
Cohesive devices.

This activity helps learners understand how texts are organized linguistically.

Activity 4: Grammar Discovery Through Poetry

Students examine another short poem and identify additional grammatical features such as tense, aspect, modification, and figurative language.

These activities promote critical reading, analytical thinking, and discourse awareness.

Conclusion

Reading is an active process of constructing meaning from evidence. Readers do not merely decode words; they use signs, patterns, and contextual information to make informed inferences about texts. As demonstrated through discourse-based activities, learners can successfully interpret texts even when their linguistic knowledge is limited.

The classroom activities discussed in this article illustrate how discourse analysis can enrich language learning by encouraging students to explore how texts create meaning. By focusing on connected texts rather than isolated language items, teachers can help learners develop deeper comprehension skills and a greater awareness of language in use.

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