



# Application of Discourse Analysis Theory in English Compound Dictation

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## Abstract

As one of the core skills of language learning, listening skill acquisition has become an area of special focus and investigation in China. For years, college English teachers have taken it as an important subject to work on and they have been searching for scientific and reasonable ways to enhance students' ability in college English listening practice. This paper attempts to investigate the possibility and strategies of applying the discourse analysis theory in college English listening comprehension so as to direct students' efforts to use discourse analysis skills to remove the drawbacks in listening comprehension. In order to prove that discourse analysis and listening comprehension are closely connected with each other, some listening materials are selected as examples to vividly demonstrate how to use discourse analysis theories in English listening courses to improve students' listening ability, especially in compound dictation.

## Subject Areas

English Education

## Keywords

English, Discourse Analysis, Listening Comprehension, Compound Dictation

## 1. Introduction

The ultimate purpose of language learning is to cultivate students' communication ability. People involved in communication should not only acquire the information from the other party, but have their ideas expressed clearly and understood. But it often occurs that a person's inability to catch the key information sometimes leads to misunderstanding or causes a halt of communication. In

terms of cultural exchange, poor listening ability even will bring about more serious consequences, throwing communication into an embarrassing situation. Even worse, the poor listener sometimes becomes a laughing stock as a result of the misinformation they've grasped. Therefore, mastering the basic skill of communication is significant for students to link themselves to the world, smooth life, and play a role in cultural exchange. However, in practical teaching, students are found to be confronted with big difficulties in listening due to various reasons, including dialects and accents, speed, stresses, intonations, rhythms, poor memory, etc. The drawbacks in students' listening practice seriously kill some students' learning interest in listening. Thus, it is imperative to find an effective way to help students find their confidence and passion in English listening comprehension. By investigating, it is found that currently what becomes students' major concern in listening practice is compound dictation. In order to learn more about students' compound dictation problems, a survey is seriously conducted. The reason why compound dictation becomes major setbacks is complicated. But one factor is that students do not know how to use linguistic knowledge to do compound dictation. As is known to all, compound dictation, which is different from other listening practices, is typically a passage composed of logically connected words and expressions with some missing information for students to fill in. The passage should be viewed holistically as a discourse. Every single word in the discourse is closely linked with each other, providing clues to work out the missing information, which best exemplifies how discourse analysis theory can be used in listening. This paper will put its focus on compound dictation and intends to teach students to make the best use of their linguistic knowledge to overcome their poor compound dictation ability.

## **2. Research Procedures**

In an attempt to investigate the possibility and strategies of applying the discourse analysis theory in compound dictation, the research is done by adopting the following key steps: First, design a questionnaire to learn about students' feedback on compound dictation; Second, collect the data from the questionnaire and give a brief description, Third, deeply probe into the fundamental reasons of compound analyze the possible strategies to resolve the problem based on the description of the data gathered.

### **2.1. Questionnaire Design on Students' Feedback on Compound Dictation**

The research is done with the help of the quantitative study method. The questionnaire, as an instrument, consists of 7 items in all, which are used to obtain genuine information about students' feedback of compound dictation. To ensure the reliability and validity, the author randomly chose 30 students who are all non-English majors studying in the same class. They are from different classes. They fill out the questionnaire in given time (See **Table 1**).

**Table 1.** Research questions.

Question Items	Yes	No
1) Is it difficult for you to do compound dictation?	93.3%	6.7%
2) Have you analyzed the reasons why you can't do well in compound dictation?	63.3%	36.7%
3) Do you think it is the poor listening habits that prevent your understanding while you are listening?	20%	80%
4) Have you tried some methods that you think effective to resolve the problem?	13.3%	86.7%
5) Have you ever thought to use discourse analysis to help you improve listening ability?	10%	90%
6) Do you agree that discourse analysis is interrelated with listening comprehension?	57%	43%
7) Do you have an idea of discourse analysis theory?	16.6%	83.4%
8) Do you want to use the discourse analysis to resolve the problem?	76.6%	23.4%

## 2.2. Data Descriptions

30 questionnaires are given out and 30 valid are returned. The valid rate goes up to 100% and the results are described as follows:

The answers from the questionnaire are calculated in the form of percentage. In terms of question 1, 93.3% students share the idea that compound dictation is truly a big challenge for them and about 63.33% students have done analysis of the reasons why they can't understand the listening materials. Approximately 20% students hold that poor listening habit counts in listening practice while the rest disagree. Confronted with the big problem in compound dictation, 13.3% students have made efforts to look for some effective methods to help them conquer the difficulty. Approximately 10% students resort to discourse analysis for help, they know a little to use discourse knowledge to work out the missing information. 57% students agree that discourse analysis can contribute to listening comprehension and they are interrelated in some way. Although 76.6% express their interest in learning the way to analyze the discourse, only 16.6% have an idea of what discourse analysis theory is. Discourse analysis still remains a vague idea to most of them.

## 2.3. Analysis and Findings

Since the students are chosen randomly, it is believed their opinions could represent the vast majority. Through careful calculation and analysis, some findings are generalized as follows: 1) Compound dictation in listening practice exists as one of the biggest problem to students. They don't know how to resolve the tough problem although they know that probably there are some effective means. Students never know that the given words in compound dictation actually serve as background and provide some clues that are useful in helping

students figuring out the missing information. What students are suggested to do is to view the paragraph as a whole instead of only focusing on the missing information. Establishing a macroscopic view is the key to boost understanding of the materials. 2) Some students claim that they know a little about the discourse analysis theory, yet they haven't formed a systematic idea of it and haven't done any exploration of the theory. They expect to know more about the co-relation between the discourse analysis and compound dictation. Hopefully with the clarification of the idea, they can do a much better job in compound dictation. Therefore, carrying out the study of the application of discourse analysis in college English listening comprehension is of great significance. This empirical study can be taken as compelling evidence to prove that discourse analysis is necessary in compound dictation for the sake of deepening students' listening comprehension.

### 3. A Brief Historical Overview of Discourse Analysis Theory

Discourse analysis theory which is defined as the study of how sentences in spoken and written language form larger meaningful units such as paragraphs, conversations, interviews, etc. is put forward by Zellig Harris in 1952. He wrote a book entitled *Discourse Analysis*. It mainly focuses on the distribution of linguistic elements in extended texts, the links between the text and its social situation. This book marked the rise of discourse analysis and made a great impact on applied linguistics at that time. Soon after the publication of Harris' book, a succession of researchers, who were influenced by it, began to turn their attention to the study of linguistics. Researches on discourse analysis prevailed in 1960s when some linguists are dissatisfied with the traditional emphasis on form rather than meaning. And in the following decades, discourse analysis has made remarkable progress. Some new concepts such as variation, speech act, conversation, monologues, discourse structure, context, etc. come into being and are gradually accepted by linguists. Harris (1952) has pointed out that language doesn't exist in unrelated words and sentences but in cohesive and coherent discourse. Theories in discourse analysis such as cohesion, coherence, schema, relevance, etc are universally acknowledged as supportive in English teaching.

In modern times, although the research on application of the discourse analysis theory in English teaching prevails, it is rarely found that researchers connect their discourse analysis with listening comprehension, especially the compound dictation. Most of the researches just narrow their focus down to reading or writing subject. It seems that listening discourse never counts. Nowadays, the traditional approach of compound dictation is still taught at sentence level, paying major attention to forms of language such as pronunciation, vocabulary, or grammar, while ignore the contents of language. From this perspective, the contents of language are what we are seeking in compound dictation. Sentence-oriented approach views compound dictation process in a static way. It depends a lot on memory. Comparatively, discourse-oriented approach expand

its views to a bigger sphere, encourage students to consider both “trees and woods”, listening for information in an active way. So, the standing point this paper holds is of practical significance in today’s English compound dictation teaching and it is believed that it opens up a new approach for compound dictation.

#### 4. Application of Discourse Analysis in Compound Dictation

Compound dictation is not simply a shallow test for vocabulary, grammar, speech sounds, intonation, etc. Instead, it should be an extremely complex process of reasoning in the use of language knowledge such as phonetics, grammar, vocabulary, sentences, paragraphs, and semantics in social and cultural knowledge. Reasoning is largely based on discourse. In terms of compound dictation, what students see and hear constitute discourse, a meaningful unit which is inseparable. Students can infer based on what are already in sight and work out the missing information. Discourse analysis and inference is a process of decoding of textual meaning. It requires students to strengthen their ability in both language ability and reading skill. This paper shows how the discourse analysis works by studying some concrete examples in listening practice.

##### 4.1. Application of Schemata Theory in Compound Dictation

Students should have an overview of the exercise when they are required to do compound dictation. Preparatory work is one of the key steps in diminishing students’ anxiety and reducing the difficulty of the text. By reading the words available, students’ background information or life experience will be activated. Carrell (1983) in his paper *Schema Theory and ESL Reading: Classroom Implications and Applications* has ever mentioned the German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s view, “Only the new concept is connected with the past experience or background knowledge can it makes sense” [1]. It guides students to retrieve what they’ve learned and put them into use. Take the following compound dictation for example:

*Studying abroad isn’t just a fun way to spend a semester. It is quickly becoming the key to success in our global economy. It is about having real experience with the world beyond your borders experience with languages, cultures and societies very different from your own.*

Apparently, this passage centers on the topic of studying abroad, a topic that most students are quite familiar with. At the sight of the topic, some related information may flood into students’ mind, including the language improvement, exotic culture, expansion of horizon, fun, diploma and so on. Studying abroad is one of the best ways to improve students’ overall quality and enhance students’ ability, paving the way to students’ success. So in the first sentence, it is not so difficult to work out the missing word to be filled in the blank probably is “success”. With help of the prediction, students feel more confident while they are listening and what they hear verifies their guessing, which evidently shows one’s

schemata plays a key role in listening comprehension.

Schemata theory dates back to 1920s and 1930s. It is attributed to the British psychologist Barlett's idea that discourse was not based on straight reproduction but was constructive. "This constructive process uses information from the encountered discourse, together with knowledge from past experience related to the discourse at hand, to build a mental representation," according to Brown and Yule (1987) [2]. In short, schemata change the traditional views on language interpretation as a passive way. It encourages students to construct the meaning of the passage actively, making the best use of their prior knowledge. Schemata theory is useful strategy in compound dictation. Compound dictation is never a one-way activity but rather an interactive process in which the message receiver's background knowledge interacts with the text.

#### 4.2. Application of Context Theory in Compound Dictation

Discourse analysis is concerned with the study of the relation between the language and the context in which it is used. Nunan (1993) holds that context falls into two categories, the linguistic context and the non-linguistic context [3]. linguistic context involves the elements such as word, phrase, collocation, etc and non-linguistic elements refer to theme, location, time, character and relationship, etc. Both linguistic context and non-linguistic context provide useful clues for the listeners to interpret the discourse. The context serves as a bridge to link the known and the unknown. Discourse analysis is absolutely a context-based process of inference. Take the following text for instance:

*Hook took a small bottle out of his pocket and poured some powder onto the cake. He believed that Peter Pan will be poisoned by his cake. Unfortunately, Tinker, who was hiding behind the light saw everything.*

This text provides some important contextual clues for students including the elements of who, what, and how. And what the students are required to do is to find out the purpose of the man, namely the element "why". Some key words surrounding the blank gives students implication. For example, in the first sentence, the word "powder" helps students see through Hook's ill will. If students are still not so sure of the potential danger to Peter Pan, then in the last sentence, another word "unfortunately" brings to the students the sense that Hook's action threatening Peter Pan's life. Just as the last sentence suggests that Hook's plot has been spotted by Tinker who has seen everything. Everything means every detail of Hook's action is exposed. So it is not difficult to guess the missing word to be filled in the blank is probably a verb of negative meaning. The missing word that comes into students' mind is most likely to be "harmed, killed or poisoned". To conclude, the contextual clues make it much easier for the students to figure out the missing word. Context also plays an important role in discourse analysis. Students cannot study discourse without the knowledge of context.

In listening comprehension, students are suggested to avoid the habit of trying to understand each word of the text and listening word-by-word or sentence-by

sentence. With the aid of schemata and context to decode the text, students will save much time to grasp the global meaning of the text, anticipate the forthcoming content, make assumptions of the main idea, guess the unknown word or make the inferences from the given expressions. The activation of schematic knowledge and contextual knowledge in discourse analysis are categorized into “top-down” listening approach. “top-down” listening process, as Greene and Hicks (1984) said, “works downward using knowledge of past experience to interpret the sensory input in terms of expectations about the environment” [4]. Simply speaking, top-down listening approach is a process of making inferences with the help of listeners’ background knowledge and context knowledge. In listening comprehension, we advocate students to take the text as holistic one in macro view so that they can see the forest through the trees.

### 4.3. Application of Discourse Connectives in Compound Dictation

English is an overt cohesion-prominent, hypo-tactic language. So connectives are often used in English to smooth the text. Like the glue, they hold different parts of the text firmly together and make the whole text run logically. The use of connectives clarifies the relationship between one sentence and another or between one clause and another. Connectives, also known as semantic marker, fall into four groups based on their different functions from the perspective of functional linguistics according to Halliday and Hasan: 1) additive that gives complementary information to the prior information (eg. “and”, “besides”, etc.). 2) cause and effect stating clearly what are the major reasons and consequences follow-by (eg. “because”, “so”, “hence”, etc.). 3) adversative that signals us the occurrence of the change of the speaker’s thought (eg. but, however, nevertheless, etc). 4) time sequence that presents the events or activities in time order (e.g at first, then, at last, etc.). The following examples illustrate how connectives play a significant role in listening comprehension:

*They have their own perspectives. Parents experienced more, while children are more enthusiastic. Therefore, worldview differences emerged between them.*

Obviously, this text presents the contrastive views of different generations because the writer employs the key connective “while”. It naturally leads the students to think that there are differences existing between them. Suppose there are not any connectives indicating the change, it increases the uncertainty for students to predict the word. To sum up, discourse connectives are commonly used to organize the text, making it cohesive and coherent. They exist to offer students explicit clues and guide students to read through the text and interpret the text properly. Therefore, students should pay particular attention to the discourse connectives when they do the listening practice.

## 5. Approaches to Cultivate Students’ Discourse Analysis Ability

There are various factors that may influence students’ performance in listening



practice. According to results from the survey conducted in one of classes consisting of 30 students, what prevent students from understanding the listening materials are mainly language speed, vocabulary scope, intonation, discourse type, discourse structure and discourse analysis ability, among which discourse-related factors accounts for 40%. **Table 2** is shown as follows:

The figures in the table show that the discourse-related factors account for 40%, among all the related factors. According to the table, discourse type, discourse structure, and discourse analysis ability potentially influence students' listening comprehension ability. Thus it can be safely concluded that the discourse-related factors are undoubtedly important factors that hamper students' listening comprehension. Actually, according to some English teachers, students who are capable of using the discourse analysis theory do much better job than those who are incapable in listening practice. Since it has been realized how important it is to learn discourse theories, then focus should falls on the approaches to cultivate students' discourse analysis ability. In this paper, some teaching examples will be cited to illustrate the best way to cultivate students' discourse analysis ability.

### 5.1. Schemata-Based Approach to Interpret Compound Dictation Discourse

It is noted that teachers in traditional listening class have got used to providing the new vocabularies for students before they ask students to do listening, because they believe that vocabulary is the key problem in listening comprehension. And after students master the key words, teachers begin to play the audio repeatedly for students until they get every single word from the audio. Undeniably, such an intensive listening practice truly strengthens student's understanding of the text and enables students to accumulate the vocabulary. However, it turns out that students' interest in listening is killed as they find it too boring to practice listening so mechanically. It is teachers' job to seek for an effective approach to help students maintain their interest in listening and accelerate their progress in English learning as well.

As mentioned above, students' cultural and sociological knowledge are linked

**Table 2.** Results of the survey on factors influencing listening comprehension.

Factors	Percentage
Language speed	20%
Vocabulary scope	23.33%
Pronunciation and intonation	16.67%
Discourse type	3.33%
Discourse structure	6.67%
Discourse analysis ability	30%



to students' performance in listening practice. So it is advisable to activate students' schemata by designing some teaching activities. Suppose the topic centers on "employment" in listening practice, can put in some information related to the topic to help students recall what they know and interact with students by asking some questions concerning employment prior to listening practice. The pre-listening tasks are one of the key steps in guiding students to achieve the listening objective. From the perspective of discourse analysis theory, pre-listening activities aimed at activating students' schemata is a way to help students fill in the information gap. Information gap refers to the gap between what students have known and what students are expected to know. Only by communication, exchanging information can students shorten the gap and quickly achieve the learning objective. As Anderson and Lynch (1988) claimed that listeners construct their meaning through acquisition of abundant resources, namely schemata [5].

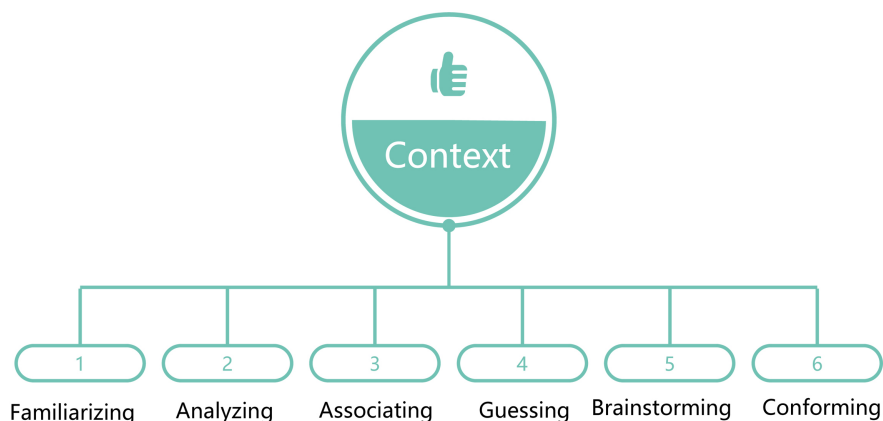
The activation of schemata stirs students' desire to interact with the discourse. Schemata also lowers students' anxiety level in listening comprehension as their familiarity with the listening materials makes students feel no longer nervous. The more information they recollect, the easier it is for them to comprehend the text. Schemata are viewed as a booster pushing students to explore the topic deeply. By activating schemata, students are able to acquire the knowledge more actively. There are various ways of activating students' schemata such as topic discussion, ask-and-answer, story-telling, etc. These activities free students from monotonous learning atmosphere and turn it into an interesting learning experience.

## 5.2. Context-Based Approach to Interpret Compound Dictation Discourse

Utilizing context could effectively help students decode the information. But figuring out the contextual clues is a big challenge to students. They should be trained to identify the key expressions indicating the theme, occasion, relationship, etc. A teaching example is provided to demonstrate the point:

*I'll have the steak, French Fries, and let's see, chocolate ice-cream for dessert. I cannot resist the temptation of these junk food. Although I know they will ruin my health, as they contain too much fat and sugar.*

It is not difficult to discover that the discourse centers on "food" and "the impact of the food choice". Steak, French Fries, chocolate ice-cream are recognized as food rich in calorie, fat and sugar. Although the speaker understands that these foods cause health risk, she still cannot resist them, because they are delicious. The delicious food induces the speaker to buy and eat. But the missing word in the blank is a noun, we can't use "induce", so the listener might consider "inducement, temptation or lure". These three words bear the similar meaning. So guessing and brainstorming are also important in discourse interpretation. In discourse analysis, words or expressions in the discourse are used to achieve the semantic coherence of the text. Students should be aware that every single word



**Figure 1.** Teaching steps in identifying contextual clues.

or phrase exists to make the text run coherently. Thus the given words must be logically connected with the missing word. Thus, the expressions surrounding the missing information are all enlightening. In order to strengthen students' ability to identify the contextual clues, teachers should guide students to do it step by step in practical teaching in the following way: familiarizing, analyzing, associating, guessing, brainstorming and conforming. That is a good chance for students to enhance their critical thinking ability and polish their listening skill. Please refer to **Figure 1**.

### 5.3. Connective-Based Approach to Interpret Compound Dictation Discourse

Understanding the global structure of the text is the premise of grasping the idea of the listening text. Without understanding the structure of the whole text, it is impossible to master the idea correctly. The framework of the text is constructed with the help of the connectives. Connectives are essential when transition between sentences or clauses occurs. Connectives increase the cohesion of the text. Teachers, when conducting teaching, should direct students' attention to the connectives, figuring out the relationship between different sentences. Utilizing connectives is proven to be an important means to help students actively construct the meaning of the listening discourse. Students should be aware of the significance of connectives in listening discourse. Recognizing and utilizing connectives in discourse analysis are equally important as the other skills in listening practice. Research also proves that identifying the connectives and making the best use of their functions in constructing the discourse are effective means building and activating students' discourse structure schemata. With the purposeful and intensive training, students' awareness of utilizing the connectives to interpret the listening discourse will be strengthened gradually.

## 6. Summary

Listening comprehension is not a passive activity. Instead, it is a complex and active discourse decoding process. Based on the empirical study of the applica-

tion of the discourse theory, it is safe to conclude that strengthening students' discourse analysis ability is conducive to improving their listening ability. But the application of the discourse analysis theory doesn't mean sacrificing the traditional emphasis on vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Discourse analysis just serves as an alternative means to help students comprehend the listening discourse, making up for the disadvantages of traditional means in listening comprehension, hence opening up a broader perspective in teaching listening.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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