

# Bringing critical discourse analysis into the foreign language classroom: A case study of a Taiwanese learner of Spanish in Costa Rica

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## Abstract

This research supports the implementation of discourse analysis through a case study of a Taiwanese learner of Spanish as a foreign language. Moreover, this study draws the need to include more pedagogical activities that promote the usage of discourse analysis, specifically in the area of conversation analysis in the language classroom. Foreign language students can be led to an understanding of how speakers engage in discourse which shapes the way they communicate with others through conversations. Language professors can benefit from dialogic speeches as a classroom method for researching their students' language performance and as a tool for examining the conversation skills among language learners. On the other hand, learners can take advantage of discourse analysis practices to become aware of how language is used for communicative purposes and social interaction. As a consequence, conversation analysis can contribute to encourage a foreign language learning environment that more accurately enriches language proficiency.

**Key words:** discourse analysis, conversation analysis, language teaching, language competence, learning strategies

## Resumen

Esta investigación promueve la implementación del análisis del discurso a partir de un estudio de caso de un estudiante taiwanés del español como lengua extranjera. Por otra parte, este estudio señala la necesidad de incluir más actividades pedagógicas que promuevan el uso del análisis

del discurso, específicamente en el área de la dinámica conversacional en el aula de idiomas. Los estudiantes de idiomas extranjeros deben ser capacitados para analizar su propio discurso de manera que puedan comunicarse competentemente en diversas interacciones. Los profesores de idiomas extranjeros pueden beneficiarse de discursos orales, por medio de diálogos como una estrategia en la clase. Con el fin de llevar a cabo una investigación del análisis del discurso, este puede ser utilizado como una herramienta para examinar las habilidades de conversación entre los estudiantes de idiomas. Además, los estudiantes pueden favorecerse de las prácticas de análisis del discurso para tomar conciencia de cómo se utiliza el lenguaje con fines comunicativos y de interacción social adecuadamente. Finalmente, el análisis de la conversación contribuirá al enriquecimiento del desempeño lingüístico de los estudiantes de lenguas extranjeras.

**Palabras claves:** análisis del discurso, análisis de la conversación, la enseñanza de idiomas, competencia lingüística, estrategias de aprendizaje

### General objective

To encourage the implementation of discourse analysis into the language classroom through a case study of a Taiwanese learner of Spanish in an unplanned and informal scenario.

### Specific objectives

- To determine the language usage involved in the speaker's interaction
- To explore how social interaction in a foreign language plays a significant role in the discourse of the speaker
- To determine the pedagogical implications of discourse analysis in the language classroom

### Research Questions

- How do foreign language learners get involved in interaction?

- What role does social interaction play in the discourse of the speaker?
- What pedagogical implications does discourse analysis have in the process of learning a second language?

### Introduction

This is a foreign language discourse analysis that explores a dialogic speech encounter among a Taiwanese learner of Spanish and the researchers, who are language professors, with the purpose of implementing pedagogical strategies to improve language acquisition in the classroom. A dialogic speech refers to verbal communication that takes place through dialogue. Discourse analysis is a vast area within linguistics where the examination of both, spoken and written language can reveal the relationship between language itself and the contexts in which it is used (McCarthy 1991). Consequently, this article analyzes the participant's discourse in light of his language features. Even though

discourse analysis does not provide all the answers to fully understand communication, it enables speakers to interpret the motivations behind a written or spoken piece of discourse. Thus, to collect the language sample, the researchers and the participant gathered one night to casually chat for approximately one hour. The investigators wanted the chat to be natural and to take place in a normal setting, so they designed a blueprint of possible questions to be asked. Nevertheless, the investigators did not stick to the planned questions, but instead they let the conversation flow naturally.

### **Review of Pertinent Studies**

Discourse analysis considers both language forms and language functions in social interactions. This field of study provides meaningful insights into how breakdowns in communication are overcome in language acquisition by comparing and analyzing how native speakers and foreign speakers use language socially. Indeed, discourse analysis examines details of speech that individuals deploy in order to convey social meaning by means of the core components of language (phonetics, phonology, morphology and syntax) and the speaker's intentions. In order to investigate the extent of discourse analysis in the field of second language acquisition, this study contemplates pertinent studies of discourse analysis carried out in various settings.

### **Tools for Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis can be sorted out into two main channels: oral and

written texts. This investigation will focus on the oral channel. Oral texts can be planned or unplanned and they are collected by means of conversations, dialogues, lectures and speeches; thus, within these social interactions, the speakers rely heavily on social conventions, intentions, and the environments where the interactions occur.

Research into the field of discourse analysis has tended to concentrate on four tools of inquiry: social languages, discourses, conversations and intertextuality. The first tool, which is social languages, refers to the way speakers build identities based on their settings and the specific situations in which they may find themselves. The second tool, discourses, highlights the fact that speakers adjust their language and behavior to the social communities or groups they might belong to, such as lawyers, teachers, and street gangs, among others. The third tool is conversations, here the speaker's intentions and motives play a significant role in the way language is used and interpreted. Finally, the tool of intertextuality deals with the world references that speakers of a language may allude to when socially interacting (Gee).

### **Areas of discourse analysis and second language teaching**

According to Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, there are four main areas that are being used in discourse analysis in the study of language acquisition: conversation analysis, critical thinking analysis, cohesion and coherence analysis and turn-taking analysis. The following studies exemplify how these types of analysis are conducted and

their implications for teaching a second language.

### **Conversation Analysis**

Regarding social identities in the use of language, Gee and his research team conducted a series of interviews to middle and upper class teenagers in Massachusetts whose parents are immigrants from diverse ethnicities. The interviewers inquired about academic, personal and national issues to see how the teenagers would use language. Among other findings, Gee and his team discovered that the upper class teenagers would rarely engage in discussions about national issues because they did not feel part of the local community. The investigators concluded that upper class teenagers develop different levels of linguistic performance, according to their needs of communication.

### **Critical thinking skills**

The principal interest in critical discourse analysis is to develop analytic competencies. Hashemi and Ghazizadeh conducted an experimental study to investigate the impact of integrating critical discourse analysis in EFL reading classes. For this purpose, 53 students at a university in Mashhad, Iran were selected as subjects of the study. This group of participants had quite similar skills in terms of both their level of proficiency in English and their critical thinking abilities. A pre-test and a post-test were applied to the EFL students to investigate the outcomes of implementing critical discourse analysis activities

and strategies during reading classes. The results of the study indicated that critical discourse analysis had a noteworthy impact on students' construal of "unstated assumptions or presuppositions" (43). In brief, the researchers claim that these critical skills can be transferable to other social environments and contexts to scaffold language learning.

### **Cohesion and Coherence**

This type of analysis refers to the use of grammar and the unity in the oral text. For this purpose, Tarone and Swierzbin conducted a discourse analysis of six learners of English as a second language from the University of Minnesota. These learners come from three different countries: Mexico, China and Central Africa. All learners were video recorded while performing the same set of language tasks. Hence, for this case study, the participants performed six tasks to prompt learner language that included the following activities: interacting in an interview, answering questions, retelling stories, narrating anecdotes, comparing pictures and identifying a problem. These tasks were transcribed and analyzed in light of the theories of second language acquisition. As a result, this study sheds light on beneficial pedagogical implications for addressing and understanding ESL learners' mistakes. As Tarone and Swierzbin point out, through this type of analysis "teachers engage in a process leading to understanding which in turn may lead to initiation of a program of action to change pedagogical approaches" (101). In short,

the researchers propose an exploratory practice of discourse analysis in the ESL classroom where language teachers could constantly examine the learners' language performance and usage as a means of eliciting effective pedagogical practices.

### **Turn-Taking**

The last essential point of discourse analysis is turn-taking. This aspect has been mainly investigated in terms of the role of the language teacher in correcting and giving feedback to students. However, Waring goes beyond this issue by analyzing the way teachers handle turn-taking while participating in class discussions and interactions. For this study, a two hour class interaction was video recorded. This class was composed of six ESL students whose first languages are: Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, French and Danish. Interestingly, the Danish and Japanese students in this study were reluctant to take turns to speak. Consequently, these types of students did not take advantage of the opportunities to either participate orally or practice the target language in class. Briefly, this study proposes a set of practical strategies to promote even participation in the language classroom.

### **Discourse analysis in the study of a Taiwanese learner of Spanish**

In order to focus on conversation analysis of a language learner, a Taiwanese student of Spanish in Costa Rica was selected to reflect upon his discourse and communication.

### **Participant's Profile**

Before describing the participant chosen for this study, it is noteworthy to mention that only one subject was chosen to analyze his discourse in Spanish, due to the fact that the authors of this article had taught students from different backgrounds, although they decided to conduct a case study with only one foreign participant. The practical nature of case studies generally involves the selection of one participant, a small group, or a whole group of individuals. This study looked at just one participant: a Taiwanese student who clearly reflected a good sample of those unusual, but existing cases of students encountered in Costa Rican language classrooms.

The participant comes from an upper middle class family in Taiwan. His name is Wen, a twenty-eight year old student and professional who owned a small computer business. He moved to Costa Rica around six years ago to work and study. Wen's native language is Mandarin and he is currently learning how to speak Spanish. According to what the authors of this article could observe, he was able to express ideas, feelings, and thoughts, ask questions, and understand others, but his speech showed several grammatical errors and his strong intonation patterns caused confusion. He needed to be listened to carefully to be clearly understood as his speech in Spanish is strongly influenced by his native language.

Moreover, to carry out this case study, the authors designed a set of questions in a very informal setting, so the participant would not feel threatened or uncomfortable. The questions were merely focused on daily life topics and the way he adapted to his new life in

Costa Rica. The interview took place in his house, where he invited the authors to have a conversation with him. The conversation was conducted in Spanish and it was not only based upon the questions stated in the oral interview, but it turned out to be a more casual chat.

### Conversation Analysis

For this case study, the researchers based the discourse analysis on the area of conversation.

Conversation analysis is the study of recorded, naturally occurring talk-in-interaction. But what is the aim of studying these interactions? Principally, it is to discover how participants understand and respond to one another in their turns at talk, with a central focus on how sequences of action are generated. To put it another way, the objective of conversation analysis is to uncover the often tacit reasoning procedures and sociolinguistic competencies underlying the production and interpretation of talk in organized sequences of interaction. (Hutchby and Wooffitt 2008)

In this study, the participant's speech was very formal and it was characterized by a heavy intonation pattern. During the interview, in some cases the researchers had to ask for clarification and repetition due to language limitations and constant pauses and hesitation throughout the conversation.

### Conversation Deviations

Most speakers of a second language run into similar difficulties when trying

to express their ideas in the target language. In this specific case, Wen was trying to accommodate himself to the researchers' native language. According to Blum-Kulka, learners may transfer pragmatic strategies from their first to their second language; even when they are aware of differences, they may still formulate wrong utterances. It is well-known that in English and Spanish the verb marks the tense; however, in Mandarin, an adverb of frequency marks the tense. Wen showed several difficulties while using the correct verb tense in Spanish, even sometimes he tended to use more than one verb tense as a way to determine the right one. The following are seven conversational aspects to analyze the participant's dialogic speech.

### Pauses and Hesitation

The researchers noticed that many of those pauses were used as a way for him to take time to formulate his ideas before uttering them. For example, when the interviewers asked him how long his military service had lasted, he replied with uncertainty by using broken sentences and long pauses. One of the dialogues was the following:

Interviewer 1: "Cuéntenos un poco de cuando usted vino a Costa Rica"

Wen: "Dos años y después yo vine aquí primero apren... para aprender español creo que primero ... ¡así! Yo fui a ULACI ¿vea? Universidad Ciencia y Tecn... bueno es primera vez que te vi."

This example, showed how he used pauses between sentences. In the case of "apren... and Tecn... he did not complete



these words maybe in the first case he did not know how to use the verb correctly and in the second case he was probably not sure about the pronunciation of the word.

### Lexical deviation

This term refers to the way words are used in certain environments. There are some lexical deviations from language to language. Sometimes these deviations can even cause misunderstandings when communicating. For example, a straw is called “popote” in Mexico; however, in Costa Rica it is called “pajilla.” Misunderstandings in second language learning can arise when people are not aware of these cultural differences. When the participant was asked when he had arrived in Costa Rica, he replied with a wrong word choice.

Interviewer 1: ¿Hace cuánto se vino para Costa Rica?

Wen: Cuando yo termino el servicio, también, que bueno... ese momento es que me *mando* para aquí.

Here the word “mando” refers to the act of moving to Costa Rica. The researchers were able to understand him because of the context in which it took place. However, the word “mando” is not used in that way in Costa Rican’s Spanish.

### Phonological Deviations

Phonological deviations take place when a sound is changed for another sound in an utterance. Phonological variations generally can be harder

to assimilate than those differences in grammar and word choices. For instance, if we compare the pronunciation of water between American and British English it is clear that there is a difference in the first vowel sound. In this case, the subject pronounced the words “errores” in Spanish as “eloles”, and “rato” as “lato” so he used the consonant phoneme “l” instead of “r.” This deviation is strongly noticeable in Wen’s speech throughout the interview.

Interviewer 2: ¿Qué es lo más difícil de comunicarse en español?

Wen: “Cuando yo salgo con mis amigos un lato me pasa que cometo muchos eloles”

### Syntactical deviation

Syntactical deviation deals with all the possible combinations of language structure. According to O’Grady et al, these variations from one language to another are considered syntactical anomalies. For instance, in English an “s” is added to the verb when speaking in third person singular. In the following dialogue, the preposition “en” instead of “a” and article “la” in his statement were omitted. In terms of verb agreement, the verb tenses were not correct. First, “aprende” instead of “aprender” and “vienen...vino” instead of “vinieron.”

Interviewer 3: ¿Cuánto tiempo tiene de estudiar español?

Wen: Yo fui en escuela de idioma para aprende español más profesional. Mi hermana mino.... plime-lo como mis papas ellos vienen vino que les gusta aquí.

### Speech Acts : Acts of Interpretation

For the purpose of this case study, a speech act is defined as a statement identified in terms of the speaker's interpretation of meaning in relation to the interviewer's questions. To analyze acts of interpretation, it is useful to talk about the consequences of uncertain relations between signifying and interpreting, which means the emergence of overinterpretation or underinterpretation. In overinterpretative responses, these "result from the fact that words have places in other forms of discourse, and that in the new usage the respondent assumes that the original place is being invoked by the articulator" (Perinbayagan 70). The moments in which Wen took the role of the articulator, the researchers as recipients can state that in overinterpretative responses, the recipient did not pay too much attention to the structures of the statements, but to their meaning. That is, he was able to answer different questions without problems in communication, but the majority of his sentences were not very well structured.

Interviewer 2: ¿Usted tiene muchos amigos ticos?

Wen: No hay muchos amigos he venido aquí.

Even though his response is not accurate, there are not any situational nor systematic overinterpretations within the dialogue, thus the message has not been hindered. In cases in which he was a little silent or hesitated, the interviewers tried to clarify by repeating what they had said and providing additional details.

Interviewer 3: ¿Wen, le gusta salir de fiesta?

Wen: Fiesta ¿cómo qué?

Interviewer 1: Salir a bailar o a tomar algo...

Wen: Ah! yo he ido uno o dos veces con amigos pero yo no bailo no se nada de eso...no ir a ba... tantas veces.

Interviewer 1: ¿En cuánto tiempo aprendió Español?

Wen: Cuánto tiempo... en reliá hasta oa todavía estoy aplendiendo bien.

Interviewer 3: ¿Qué tan a menudo habla en español?

Wen: Sólo platico si es que tengo que trabajal en Heedia siempre tengo que hablal trabaja en comunicación tengo que il a visital crientes y sólo español ellos habla".

For producing discursive acts, the articulators make complex structures to show their intentions and the respondent tries to catch the intentions of the articulators. For this case, Wen answered all of the interlocutors questions in a satisfactory manner. Even when some sentences were not totally well structured or grammatically sound, there was logic between them.

### Conversation Overlapping

In regards to traces of conversation overlapping, it is said that respondents create their own effects on the person he/she is talking to. In interpreting Wen's responses, it is important to remember that the intentions of different responses do mean several things, or perhaps only one, also both things can be meant. Since some statements may have not only one meaning but several, and that both, the articulator and the



respondent can interpret, it is interesting to consider the following example from this perspective:

Wen: Yo no bailo, no se nada de eso.  
 Interviewer 2: Ella le puede enseñar.  
 Wen: ¿Quién?  
 Interviewer 2: Ella (pointing at interviewer 3)  
 Wen: Ah. (laughing) (End of topic in the conversation)

Here, Wen's last response may mean different connotations. First, there is the possibility that he showed surprise. Second, this may mean "No thanks". Third, maybe he wanted to be polite and he may have been willing to learn how to dance; however, he preferred to say nothing else and just exclaimed "ah" and then smiled, but in fact he was not interested at that moment. In fact the third possibility can be interpreted as a sign to change the topic.

### Interviewee's attitude

Needless to say, the attitudes that learners of a second language show are shaped according to their cultural backgrounds and social conventions. For this case study, it was evident by the way Wen responded that he did not want his responses to seem to be rude, strong or categorical, instead, he just overlapped some topics elicited by the interviewers. Conversely, he was kind and answered all of the questions; he eventually provided further information to his responses when the interviewers inquired about them.

Vivian: ¿Cuánto tiempo tiene de estudiar Español?

Wen: Dos años. Bueno, mi hermana vino a estudiar, como mis papas ellos vienen vino que le gusta aquí cuando yo termino el servicio, por eso momento es que me mándo para aquí.

Vera: ¿Cuál servicio?

Wen: El servicio militar

Mayra: ¿Eso es obligatorio en su país?

Wen: Si.

Vivian: ¿Cuánto dura el servicio militar?

Wen: Dos años primero pa'apreen... aprended español. Así yo fui a ULACI vea? Es primera vez que te vi.

Wen was able to keep a conversation going about many topics. The interviewee talked about casual topics, but his responses were short and brief due to his attitude towards responding and his language limitations.

### Discourse analysis in the classroom

Including discourse analysis, explicitly conversation, students studying a foreign language need to learn how to examine dialogic speeches to be aware of how to analyze structure and interpret their meaning. Professors can include exercises that enable discussion to determine if the speaker in his/her discourse has delivered communicative messages and competent speech. By making use of case studies such as Wen's, students can be introduced to simple ideas of casual speech.

Through these types of case studies, students learn that discourse analysis can be applied to different contexts. Several contexts studied in oral conversation courses such as gender, daily life, media, environment

and cultural situations, can be excellent topics for collecting and working with discourse. Data taken from these analyses becomes an integral aspect of this type of classes in which discussion is essential. Furthermore, the study of discourse analysis in the foreign language class provides the opportunity to gather practical learning and teaching activities.

### Recommendations

This study provides suggestions to language professors to implement conversation analysis in the classroom. Consequently, language instructors will discover how language changes and evolves over time, and explore the most effective uses of language for communication, focusing on English students whose native language is different from Spanish, as is the case of the English of the participant in this study. The following are some recommendations to teach students to use spoken discourse more effectively in the classroom:

- Enable learners to reflect upon discourse and communication: By looking at authentic language used in real or casual environments, students learn how to appreciate and be aware of the discourse patterns associated within a particular context or situation.
- Implement self-recording activities: More practical activities that require self-recording exercises are the first step in introducing discourse analysis awareness. Include activities in which students are able to record and transcribe their own spontaneous speech for further analysis in order to improve communicative competence. This helps the learners to be aware of self monitoring. Use activities that can easily be adapted to suit a variety of foreign language learning situations that meet the course functions.
- Peer analysis: Have students themselves explore their own and others' spoken interactions. Students need to have the experience of creating their own questions and interview each other. Whenever possible, they should record themselves to capture both questions and responses exactly as they were said. After that, they can transcribe their conversation. A transcript will help learners identify words, phonemes or grammar features easily in the data analysis.
- Break language down into skill areas: Ask students to break down the target language into areas such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation in order to provide analysis of different features for each area. Taking a closer look at nouns, verbs, and adjectives in dialogues will help to find any common features.
- Encourage the analysis of spoken interaction, including aspects of informal talk: Through interactive activities that promote interaction, learners will be provided with a whole array of opportunities for them to engage in talk. Language professors are likely to notice that students produce different speech patterns in response to different communicative tasks. For instance, debates and impromptu role plays can be examples of these tasks.

- Include discourse analysis for teaching culture: Language and culture cannot be separated. Exploring the use of the target language within a particular culture will help students figure out what function intertextuality serves in light of the overall argument. For instance, students of English as a second language who develop their communicative competence within a foreign culture might find that this type of analysis is actually very enhancing due to the fact that they can compare and contrast both cultures, the one in which they are learning and the target culture.
- Use media resources to listen to and observe speakers for realistic analysis: Media tools are popular subjects of analysis for critical discourse. Working with audio and video recordings of talk and social interaction is always an accurate and authentic method to be used in and outside the classroom. For example, English professors can select videos to represent standard American and British English to analyze a short conversation or speech and then compare and contrast certain choices of verbs or vocabulary in speech.

## Conclusions

Discourse analysis leads the language learner into the examination of how specific speakers build an argument, and how this argument is interpreted into social environments. More importantly, students can learn how to demonstrate what kind of statements the speakers try to establish as

accurate or appropriate; thus, they develop their own language competence more confidently. Therefore, foreign language professors can implement conversation analysis to emphasize certain aspects of the language and encourage students to investigate and then apply their findings into their daily speech, improving their own knowledge.

In the language classrooms, professors should maximize opportunities for student participation that include strategies to monitor their own output. Communicative settings engage discussion in the classroom, thus professors are more likely to discover that students produce different speech patterns in response to different types of tasks. Throughout conversation analysis research, language learners are able to investigate interaction patterns to practice the target language, analyzing which patterns are the ones which promote or hinder communication.

Teaching conversation analysis therefore encourages independent learning and critical thinking which is very necessary for the students' academic learning. As it was demonstrated through the case study of a Taiwanese learner of Spanish, discourse analysis can be implemented in any language classroom and setting and different aspects of dialogic speech can be analyzed. For second language learning, the knowledge about language diversity is essential to understand facts about the learning of the language itself.

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## APPENDIX

### Guía para entrevista oral a estudiante Taiwanés

**Instrucciones:** Utilice las preguntas listadas abajo como guía para entrevistar al participante del estudio de caso.

- Cuente un poco de cuando usted vino a Costa Rica
- ¿Usted tiene muchos amigos ticos?
- ¿Le gusta salir de fiesta?
- ¿Usted ha ido a otros países?
- ¿Cuánto tiempo tiene de estudiar español?
- ¿Le gusta la comida de Costa Rica?
- ¿Cuál?
- ¿Qué tipo de música le gusta?
- ¿Qué grupos o cantantes le gustan?
- ¿La gente joven en Taiwán sale mucho?
- ¿Cómo es el español en comparación con el mandarín?
- ¿Qué es lo más difícil del español?
- ¿En qué lugar trabaja?
- ¿Cómo se imaginaba Costa Rica?