

THE CONTRIBUTION OF SPERBER-WILSON'S RELEVANCE THEORY ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY OF STUDENTS' PERSUASIVE TEXT WRITINGS

Ana Yusyfiana dan Wulandari Pratiwi

Sekolah Tinggi Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan (STKIP) Persis Bandung

Email: yusyfiana@gmail.com dan wulandari.p@gmail.com

Abstrak

The study reported here is based on an investigation on the students' writing. The students were asked to compose tourism brochures as a kind of persuasive texts. Data were collected from 25 students who were randomly divided into 3 groups through a pre-test and a post-test. The data were then analyzed by using the criteria of persuasiveness (Austin, 1962) in Relevance Theory. These criteria include perlocutionary force, cognitive effects, advertising copy, rhetorical expressions, and metaphor. Analyses show that, after the students are introduced to criteria of persuasiveness, the quality of their persuasive text writing improved. This improvement can be identified from the amplifying quality of the criteria of persuasiveness in the students' post-test writing. The study concludes that even though the concept of Relevance Theory is based on the philosophy of language and regarded as obtaining little practical adaptability to the language-teaching context, language teaching profession could usefully have made more use of this theory to examine teaching-learning process in the classrooms.

Keywords: *English, Language, Teaching, Persuasive Text, Writing*

Introduction

Background of the Study This paper reports the findings of a quantitative research in a class of tourism and hospitality program of a community college in Bandung. The investigation was intended to investigate the students' persuasive text writing. Since the main objectives of persuasive communication are to be understood and to be believed, the projected audience should understand the utterances given and believe in the messages. This process deals with the concept of relevance.

The concept of relevance emerges as the reaction toward some utterances violating the Grice-maxim, however, they are still able to be comprehended. Relevance permeates the gap between what we say and what we have in mind based on the

context. When we deal with persuasive texts, for example brochure, so we tend to apply the Relevance Theory.

The interrelation between persuasive texts and Relevance Theory can be attained on Arai's research (2007) which offers an analysis of persuasiveness used in advertising language as viewed through relevance theory. The paper proposes that a part what makes successful advertising copy persuasive can be explained by relevance theory's notion of mental profit (cognitive effect) for the readers. Taillard has also conducted a research that used relevance theory. Her paper tries to see that Relevance theory bridges communication and cognition. She believes that pragmatic can only benefit from an analysis of persuasive communication. In line with the previous research, Perez's (2000) paper aims to analyse the applicability of Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory to advertising discourse.

The previous researches have shown that Relevance Theory can be related to persuasive text. This present study, thus, was aimed to show the interrelation between Relevance Theory and persuasive text regarding ELT in the community college. One of the text learned is a persuasive text in the form of brochure.

- Literary Review (Relevance Theory)

Relevance Theory is proposed by Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson (see: Sperber & Wilson, 1981) in reaction to the Cooperative Principles offered by Paul Grice (see: Grice, 1975). Rather different from Grice, who pays attention in inferences and implicature, Sperber and Wilson argue that explicit side of communication are also worthy of pragmatic investigation. They put forward two main principles of communication: Cognitive Principle and Communicative Principle. Cognitive Principle deals mainly with what the speaker means, on the other hand, Communicative Principle copes with what the speaker says.

According to Grundy (2008: 139-140), there are six essential principles of relevance theory. First, every utterance has its own particular relevance. Thus, we will comprehend the utterance if we are able to prove its relevance. Second, a hearer cannot prove the relevance of the utterances they hear without taking context into account. Considering this phenomenon, the speaker must make some assumptions about the hearer's cognitive abilities and contextual resources.

Third, the grammatical linguistic structure of utterances is not considered to be taken into account. Fourth, when the logic behind an utterance has been elaborated completely, the utterance has a possibility to be regarded as a premise. Fifth, the most relevance utterance is the one that has the most accessible interpretation. Consequently, the greater the effect of an utterance, the more relevant it is. When a hearer hardly comprehends the utterance, the less relevance the utterance is. Finally, context is treated as "a set of more accessible items of information which are stored in short-term memories" (Sperber & Wilson, 1995: 142).

From the above explanation on Relevance Theory, it can be deduced that Relevance Theory recognizes and can account for the fact that not all utterances are successfully understood or may be understood in different ways and different degrees by different addressees. Many advertisements, newspaper headlines, and joke telling establish what Grundy (2008) says as an "understanding test" in which the processing effort is very great but worth engaging because the understanding is more rewarding.

- Relevance and Persuasiveness

Persuasion is the communicative act that carries out two aims of communication. The aims are to be understood and to be believed. An audience that is categorized persuaded when one has understood an utterance, and believed its message. Persuasiveness also has much to do with the notion of 'relevance' as defined by Relevance Theory. Persuading someone is carrying out an act that affects someone's desire and belief using some form of communication, usually language. Relevance is one of the crucial determinants when measuring persuasiveness, which is based on several criteria. By the light of this fact, J. Austin (1962) proposed criteria of persuasiveness. The criteria of persuasiveness is presented below:

- a. Perlocutionary force

Perlocutionary force is one of the notions in persuasiveness in which a sentence (an utterance) has to affect other people's actions and attitude. In this theory an ordering utterance should be more effective than other

ordering utterance. A good advertisement should utilize utterances that contain the force.

b. Cognitive effects

Cognitive effects are defined as denying assumptions, replacing old assumptions with new assumptions, or getting contextual implication through the utterance. A good advertisement should provide utterance that is relevance for certain marketing target.

c. Advertising copy

In the advertisement field the term 'copy' means the literal parts of the advertisement, including headlines, body text, slogans, captions, plugs, product names, and company names. In this paper, we are primarily focusing on headlines because they usually consist of short phrases or a few words and have similar characters with the shortest literature.

d. Rhetorical expressions

The rhetorical expressions are the expressions found in advertisement that is easily understood by the viewers and containing certain messages. The phrases can be linked with some pictures or symbols. The rhetorical expressions intend to convey many weak implicatures.

e. Metaphor

According to Carston (2000), a metaphor is considered to be an ad hoc concept construction of a word in relevance theory. The aim of the advertisement is to persuade more people to buy or use the product, the use of certain word or phrases is quite important to raise their interest. By using metaphor is a way to raise their curiosity, thus, people will try to find out more information about the product

Methodology

In this research, an experimental design was adopted. The statistical calculation of t-test was employed in this present study to determine the effect of criteria of persuasiveness to students' persuasive writing. A t-test calculation produces t value that can be used to judge whether the introduction of criteria of persuasiveness plays a significant role in improving students' persuasive text writing.

- Research Site and Participants

The participants of the study were a class of second semester students of Tourism and Hospitality Program at a community college in Bandung. The class consisted of 25 students. The students were randomly divided into three groups. They were the focus groups or participants of the study. This random sampling was employed to avoid any bias in an experimental design.

The students' English level in general belongs to the intermediate or upper intermediate. The site of the research, one of community colleges in Bandung, was chosen because it is the place where one of the researchers works. The second semester students were selected because they learn persuasive text writing in this particular year. Considering all these, the researcher assumed that there would not be any administrative difficulties in conducting the research. If there existed, the problems would be relatively small.

- Data Collection Procedures and Instrument

Data were collected through an investigation on both the students' pre-test and post-test persuasive text writing guided by criteria of persuasiveness in Relevance Theory. The criteria comprise five elements: perlocutionary force, cognitive effects, advertising copy, rhetorical expressions, and metaphor. These criteria of persuasiveness were used as the instrument of the study.

This kind of instrument is believed to be capable of determining the quality of students' pre-test and post-test writing in the way that, firstly, the format gives clear statements whether the students' writing fulfil those criteria. Secondly, the format is also equipped by remarks to provide clearer explanations of how the criteria present or absent.

Regarding the data collection procedures, first of all, the data will be collected from the writing test (pre-test) given to the participants, a class of 25 students who were then divided into three groups. Pre-test will be given to the students without any treatment and prior knowledge to the Relevance Theory and criteria of persuasiveness. In the pre-test, they will be asked to write a brochure of Bali. The lectures on Relevance Theory and criteria of persuasiveness were conducted for four meetings. From this pre-test, the students' initial skill of composing persuasive text will be obtained, and compared

later with theirs in the post-test after the general principles of Relevance Theory and the criteria of persuasiveness are introduced to the students to reveal the approach's strength to promote the students' persuasive text writing.

Results And Discussions

- **Types of Data Obtained and Frameworks of Data Analysis**

Two types of data were collected through this investigation of students' persuasive text writing. The first type is in the forms of explanations of students' persuasive text writing quality. This kind of data can be found in the remarks part of the research instrument. The second type is in the forms of pre-test and post-test scores. This kind of data is obtained after the first type of data is collected.

It is believed that the first type of data is capable of answering the first research question because it reveals the quality of students' writing. Similar to the first type, the second type data, which is in the forms of pretest and post-test scores, are capable of answering the second research question, which tries to reveal whether there is any significant improvement of students' persuasive text writing.

- **Findings and Discussion**

After the pre-test data was collected, four meeting lectures on Relevance Theory and criteria of persuasiveness were conducted as the treatment for the participants. After that, the post-test was carried out. To see whether there is any significant improvement on students' persuasive text writing, the statistical calculation of t-test was employed. After totalling the pre-test and post-test scores from all the participants, it is found that the t value is - 4.88. By using alpha 0.05 and $df = 2$, it can be concluded that there is a significant improvement of students' persuasive text writing.

Conclusions

From the investigation of students' persuasive text writing, guided by criteria of persuasiveness in Relevance Theory, we come to the following conclusions:

1. The introduction to the criteria of persuasiveness has contributed to the improvement of students' persuasive text writing. This improvement is indicative strongly in some criteria: perlocutionary force, cognitive effects, and advertising copy. But in general there is amplifying quality of the criteria of persuasiveness in students' writing.
2. Even though the concept of Relevance Theory is based on the philosophy of language and regarded as obtaining little practical adaptability to the language-teaching context, language teaching profession could usefully have made more use of this theory to examine teaching-learning process in the classrooms.

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