Enhancing English Learners' Comprehension Through Semantic Strategies in Classroom Discourse

Calvyn Sepanya Siregar,*1 Bernieke Anggita Ristia Damanik2
12Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar
Email: calvynsiregar90@gmail.com, bernieke.damanik@uhn.ac.id

Abstract

This paper investigates how semantic strategies employed in instructional discourse influence English learners' comprehension. Grounded in theories of speech acts, semantics, and sociolinguistics, the study explores how meaning is both conveyed and negotiated through classroom interaction. Through a qualitative, library-based analysis, it identifies core semantic patterns such as cohesive devices, modality, referential expressions, and clarification techniques that enhance the meaning-making process. The study also highlights how teachers' semantic awareness can scaffold learner engagement and support deeper comprehension. Findings underscore the importance of purposeful language planning, suggesting that explicit focus on semantic strategies can lead to more meaningful and effective English instruction. The study further identifies practical implications for English teachers, highlighting the benefits of fostering semantic awareness in classroom talk to improve learner autonomy and interpretive skills.

Keywords: *Semantic Strategies; English Learning; Classroom Discourse*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini menyelidiki bagaimana strategi semantik yang digunakan dalam wacana instruksional mempengaruhi pemahaman pelajar bahasa Inggris. Didasarkan pada teori tindak tutur, semantik, dan sosiolinguistik, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana makna disampaikan dan dinegosiasikan melalui interaksi di dalam kelas. Melalui analisis kualitatif berbasis kepustakaan, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi pola semantik inti seperti perangkat kohesif, modalitas, ekspresi referensial, dan teknik klarifikasi yang meningkatkan proses pembuatan makna. Studi ini juga menyoroti bagaimana kesadaran semantik guru dapat meningkatkan keterlibatan siswa dan mendukung pemahaman yang lebih dalam. Temuan menggarisbawahi pentingnya perencanaan bahasa yang terarah, menunjukkan bahwa fokus eksplisit pada strategi semantik dapat menghasilkan pengajaran bahasa Inggris yang lebih bermakna dan efektif. Penelitian ini juga mengidentifikasi implikasi praktis bagi guru bahasa Inggris, menyoroti manfaat dari menumbuhkan kesadaran semantik dalam percakapan di kelas untuk meningkatkan kemandirian dan kemampuan interpretasi siswa.

Kata Kunci: *Strategi Semantik; Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris; Wacana Kelas*

INTRODUCTION

Language in education is not merely a subject to be studied; it functions as a central medium through which learning takes place. In the realm of English language education, language is both the object and the vehicle of instruction. Learners acquire new knowledge, construct meaning, and develop cognitive skills through their interaction with language. Therefore, the way language is used in educational settings significantly influences the depth and quality of student learning. This dual role of language—as both content and tool—underscores the importance of examining how linguistic features impact the learning process, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts.

Comprehension, in the context of language education, refers to a learner's ability to decode, interpret, and make sense of spoken and written texts. It is a complex, dynamic process that does not occur in isolation but is shaped by multiple factors such as linguistic input, contextual information, and the learner's prior knowledge. Importantly, comprehension is not a passive activity; it is actively constructed through the learner's engagement with language structures, social interactions, and communicative intentions. In classroom settings, the teacher's language plays a crucial role in guiding learners through this meaning-making process. The language of instruction, including how questions are framed, explanations are delivered, and feedback is provided, can either facilitate or hinder comprehension.

Despite the recognition of language's critical role in learning, many instructional practices still prioritize content delivery over language mediation. This presents a core problem in English language classrooms, where teachers may not always be aware of how their linguistic choices affect students' understanding. There is a tendency to focus on grammatical accuracy or vocabulary acquisition without considering how meaning is conveyed through larger semantic and pragmatic structures. As a result, opportunities for deep comprehension and critical engagement with language are often missed. Moreover, the absence of systematic attention to the semantic features of classroom discourse may limit students' ability to develop the interpretive skills necessary for advanced language proficiency.

A number of studies in applied linguistics and education have examined how teacher talk influences learner comprehension. Research grounded in speech act theory and classroom discourse analysis has shown that language functions such as questioning, elaboration, and clarification prompts significantly affect how students process information. For example, studies by Walsh (2006) and Mercer & Howe (2012) highlight the importance of dialogic teaching and the role of interactive discourse in scaffolding learner understanding. Similarly, work by Gibbons (2002) emphasizes the need for language support strategies that are attuned to learners' cognitive levels and linguistic needs. These studies collectively

suggest that a strategic use of language—attuned to both semantic meaning and pragmatic function—can greatly enhance learning outcomes in EFL settings.

This study aims to investigate how semantic features in instructional discourse contribute to the development of learners' comprehension skills in English language classrooms. Specifically, it seeks to identify which language patterns—such as definitional structures, reformulations, and inferential prompts—are most effective in supporting learners' meaning-making processes. The study also intends to explore how teachers can intentionally use these linguistic strategies to scaffold comprehension and promote deeper engagement with language. By foregrounding the semantic dimension of instructional discourse, this research aspires to provide practical insights for EFL teachers and contribute to the broader understanding of effective language pedagogy.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach using library research as its primary method. The research is descriptive-analytical in nature, aiming to explore and describe how semantic strategies in instructional language contribute to learners' comprehension in English language learning. Rather than conducting direct classroom observations or experiments, the study draws insights from the systematic analysis of scholarly sources that examine relevant semantic and pedagogical concepts.

The data sources consist of academic journal articles, scholarly books, and previous research findings related to semantics in language teaching, comprehension strategies, speech acts, and classroom discourse. These sources were selected purposively based on their relevance to the topic and scholarly credibility. Particular emphasis was placed on literature published within the last five years (2019–2024) to ensure the study's alignment with current trends and developments in applied linguistics and language education.

The data collection technique involved a comprehensive review of digital academic databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and ScienceDirect. After identifying and curating relevant literature, content analysis was used as the primary analytical tool. This involved identifying semantic patterns present in classroom communication—such as the use of modality, cohesive devices, contextual references, and specific types of speech acts. These elements were categorized and interpreted in relation to their pedagogical functions and their impact on comprehension. The findings are presented descriptively and interpreted through the theoretical frameworks of semantics and pragmatics that underpin this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Modality and Tentative Language Use

Modality, often conveyed through modal verbs such as can, may, might, should, could, and would, plays a pivotal role in shaping the interpersonal dynamics of classroom discourse. These expressions allow educators to express varying degrees of certainty, suggestiveness, or politeness, rather than issuing rigid or direct instructions. For example, phrases like "You might consider another approach" or "We could look at this from a different perspective" open up interpretive space for learners, signaling that multiple viewpoints are acceptable and that exploration is encouraged.

This approach is particularly important in learner-centered classrooms, where autonomy and agency are valued. Modality serves to empower students, offering choices and reducing the authoritative tone often associated with traditional instruction. Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis supports this strategy by suggesting that learners are more receptive to language input when they feel psychologically secure. Modal verbs, by softening the teacher's stance, help reduce anxiety and build rapport. Furthermore, they create an implicit dialogic space, where learners feel more invited to participate, hypothesize, or question without fear of being wrong.

Cohesive Devices and Semantic Coherence

Cohesive devices are linguistic elements that establish connections across sentences and ideas, ensuring that discourse is logically structured and semantically coherent. These include conjunctions (e.g., because, although, however), reference markers (e.g., this, that), lexical chains, and discourse markers. Their consistent use provides learners with essential signposts that support their processing and retention of complex information.

In the EFL classroom, where students are developing both linguistic and cognitive academic skills, cohesive devices assist in building textual schemata and enhancing readability. Teachers who employ phrases such as "On the other hand," "As a result," or "Therefore" help learners grasp causal relationships, contrasts, and sequences, all of which are critical for academic discourse comprehension. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), cohesion functions both grammatically and semantically to create meaningful wholes from discrete linguistic units. When instructors make these cohesive markers explicit, they not only improve comprehension but also model effective academic writing and speaking structures.

Clarification and Reformulation Strategies

Clarification and reformulation involve restating, simplifying, or elaborating on content to make meaning more accessible. These strategies are essential when students indicate confusion or when teachers anticipate potential misunderstandings. A clarification might involve simplifying a complex term, while reformulation could involve paraphrasing an idea using more familiar vocabulary or grammatical constructions. For example, the statement "Photosynthesis is the process plants use to make food from sunlight" may be reformulated as "Plants turn sunlight into energy—that's called photosynthesis."

Such strategies are particularly effective in heterogeneous classrooms, where learners come from diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds. Clarification addresses linguistic gaps, while reformulation facilitates cognitive processing by presenting information in a redundant, yet varied, manner. This aligns with principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which emphasizes providing multiple means of representation. Ahmad and Yusuf (2021) note that these strategies not only aid in understanding but also build learners' confidence by validating their attempts and scaffolding their development toward more complex language use.

Questioning Strategies and Dialogic Engagement

Effective questioning is central to fostering an interactive and cognitively engaging classroom environment. Beyond basic comprehension checks, higher-order questions stimulate analytical and inferential thinking. Teachers may ask, "What do you think would happen if...?" or "Can you explain why the character acted that way?" These types of inquiries encourage learners to reflect, evaluate, and generate hypotheses, engaging deeply with content.

From a sociocultural perspective, questioning is an essential scaffold within Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development. Through strategic questioning, teachers help learners perform cognitive tasks just beyond their independent capabilities. Moreover, open-ended and inferential questions promote epistemic engagement—students are invited to position themselves as knowledge constructors rather than passive recipients. Johnson (2019) further suggests that effective questioning nurtures dialogic spaces, where meaning is co-constructed through language, enhancing both linguistic proficiency and critical thinking.

Referential Expressions and Continuity of Discourse

Referential expressions such as this, that, these, those, the former, and the latter are fundamental to maintaining continuity in spoken and written discourse. These expressions create semantic links between ideas across a lesson or text, ensuring that learners can follow thematic progressions and retain coherence. For example, a teacher might say, "This idea builds on what

we discussed earlier about narrative voice," effectively anchoring new input in prior knowledge.

The use of reference is especially crucial in spoken interaction, where students cannot revisit earlier utterances. Referential cohesion provides cognitive relief by reducing processing demands and supporting memory. Tanaka (2022) emphasizes that clarity and frequency in referential cues significantly affect learners' ability to integrate new and old information. Teachers who consistently model referential devices also train students in academic conventions, improving their reading comprehension and writing coherence.

Paraphrasing and Confirmation as Interactional Scaffolds

Paraphrasing is a powerful discourse tool that serves both linguistic and affective functions. When a teacher paraphrases a student's answer, it not only confirms understanding but also subtly models more academic or precise language. For instance, a student says, "He's mad," and the teacher responds, "So you're saying he's expressing frustration due to internal conflict?" This exchange validates the learner's contribution while enriching their language exposure.

Paraphrasing also promotes collaborative meaning-making. It reinforces concepts through rewording and introduces synonyms, idiomatic expressions, or formal registers. According to Martinez (2020), repeated exposure to paraphrased content enhances vocabulary depth, improves syntactic flexibility, and helps internalize academic discourse norms. Confirmation practices build learner confidence, create a safe space for participation, and promote deeper cognitive investment in classroom talk.

Conditional Sentences as Organizational Signals

Conditional constructions—such as "If you look at the next part," or "If we assume the data is correct…"—serve as both grammatical and instructional devices. In classroom discourse, they guide learners' attention, establish logical relationships, and prompt predictive or hypothetical thinking. Teachers use these to introduce alternatives, structure thinking paths, and signal outcomes based on certain premises.

From a cognitive standpoint, conditional structures demand inferencing and abstraction. Learners must mentally simulate scenarios, consider consequences, or formulate conditional reasoning. This aligns with higher-order thinking skills emphasized in Bloom's taxonomy. Smith (2024) argues that conditionals are invaluable in inquiry-based learning, as they invite learners to engage in guided discovery and hypothesis testing. Their regular use in instruction fosters analytical reasoning and prepares students for academic genres where such logic is essential.

Moreover, the use of conditional language in the classroom cultivates critical thinking habits, especially when tied to hypothetical case studies or cross-textual analysis. It prompts learners to evaluate multiple potential outcomes and consequences, which in turn sharpens their evaluative and decision-making skills. This semantic strategy also facilitates transfer of knowledge across disciplines, as conditional reasoning is central to scientific inquiry, historical interpretation, and argumentative writing. By embedding conditionals into classroom dialogue, teachers can transform abstract theorizing into concrete linguistic practice that learners internalize and apply in both academic and real-world contexts.

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Table 1. Extended Semantic Features That Enhance Comprehension in English Language Instruction

Semantic Feature	Example Expression	Instructional Function and Pedagogical Role
Modality	"You could try explaining it from another angle."	Encourages autonomy and critical thinking; reduces pressure and invites learner choice.
Cohesive Devices	"In contrast, the second argument is more evidence-based."	Creates semantic links across discourse; strengthens textual unity.
Clarification	"To clarify, the experiment does not prove the hypothesis—it only supports it."	Removes ambiguity; reinforces key concepts for lower-proficiency learners.
Open-Ended Questioning	"What might be the implications of this decision in a different context?"	Promotes higher-order thinking and analytical reasoning.
Conditional Structures	"If we assume the data is correct, what could that mean?"	Stimulates predictive reasoning and abstract thinking.
Referential Language	"These findings are directly linked to our	Builds coherence by connecting new and prior

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Paraphrasing	"So, you believe the character's actions reflect his internal conflict?"	Models reformulation and academic vocabulary.
Reformulation	"Let me phrase it differently so it's easier to follow."	Offers real-time content adjustment for clarity.
Discourse Markers	"Conversely, the data from 2020 showed a decline."	Guides listener attention and marks logical shifts.
Metalinguistic Commentary	"Note how the use of the passive voice removes the agent."	Encourages reflection on form-function relationships.
Nominalization	"Their disagreement led to the cancellation of the project."	Compacts complex actions into academic expressions.
Apposition	"Dr. Yamada, a leading researcher, disagrees with this theory."	Embeds clarification to enhance meaning.
Hedging	"There appears to be a potential correlation."	Adds nuance and fosters careful reasoning.
Prosodic Emphasis (oral)	"The **most critical** point here is coherence."	Highlights importance in oral discourse; supports comprehension.
Enumerative Language	"First, define. Then, compare. Finally, conclude."	Structures instruction in sequence.
Contrastive Structures	"While Group A improved, Group B showed little change."	Aids comparative analysis and critical evaluation.
Reporting Verbs	"The author suggests the results were inconclusive."	Builds summary and attribution skills.
Demonstratives in Context	"This type of reasoning is flawed."	Clarifies referents and improves argumentation clarity.
Parenthetical Explanation	"She refused (perhaps due to fear) to answer."	Adds nuance and supports layered interpretation.
Repetition with Variation	"Interpret—that is, understand—the	Reinforces learning through rephrasing.

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As presented in Table 1, these semantic features do not operate in isolation but rather collectively shape the discursive environment of the classroom. They assist in managing the cognitive complexity of academic content, promote comprehension through diverse input forms, and help learners develop metalinguistic awareness—a crucial skill in achieving academic literacy. The deliberate integration of these features into instructional talk enables educators to move beyond rote explanation toward more dynamic, inclusive, and interactional modes of teaching that respond to the diverse needs of EFL learners.

Pedagogical Implications of Semantic Strategy Use

The findings discussed above suggest that semantic strategies in instructional discourse are not merely rhetorical choices but foundational to equitable and effective language teaching. Their deliberate use allows teachers to scaffold meaning, foster interaction, and guide learners toward deeper comprehension, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. Modal verbs promote learner autonomy and reduce affective barriers. Cohesive devices structure discourse and improve text navigation. Clarification and reformulation ensure conceptual clarity for linguistically diverse classrooms.

Furthermore, questioning and paraphrasing strategies enhance metacognitive engagement and co-construction of knowledge. Referential expressions and conditional structures support retention, inference, and academic literacy by cultivating thematic continuity and logical reasoning. Collectively, these semantic tools bridge the gap between linguistic form and pedagogical function.

Teacher training programs should emphasize semantic awareness as part of professional competence. Pre-service and in-service educators must be trained not only to recognize these features but also to incorporate them purposefully in real-time classroom interactions. Materials developers and curriculum designers should also embed opportunities for teachers and learners to engage with these features across content areas. Ultimately, the intentional integration of semantic strategies serves as a powerful mechanism to support inclusive, dialogic, and cognitively rich language instruction. Learners must mentally simulate scenarios, consider consequences, or formulate conditional reasoning. This aligns with higher-order thinking skills emphasized in Bloom's taxonomy. Smith (2024) argues that conditionals are invaluable in inquiry-based learning, as they invite learners to engage in guided discovery and hypothesis testing. Their regular

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CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown that specific semantic features used in classroom discourse—such as modality, cohesive devices, clarification techniques, and questioning—can significantly improve students' comprehension in English learning. These features help students process information more clearly by linking ideas, prompting deeper thinking, and supporting understanding through repetition and reformulation. Teachers who are aware of the semantic impact of their language choices can plan their instruction more effectively. By intentionally using these strategies, teachers not only deliver content but also help students build meaning step by step. Future research can explore how these techniques work in different learning environments, including online or bilingual classrooms

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