

**Inglés**

---



## TEACHING DESCRIPTIVE TEXTS: A PRACTICAL APPROACH

ALICIA LASPRA RODRÍGUEZ\*

### ABSTRACT

This essay is intended to offer a brief explanation of the main features that identify the descriptive text type, its frequent combination with the narrative text type, and some devices by which textual cohesion and coherence may be achieved. A few teaching tips and a practical exercise with its corresponding key are also included. The whole article is aimed at teachers in order to provide them with some guidelines and techniques to deal with text analysis, as required by the Principality of Asturias Curriculum for Compulsory and Post-Compulsory Education .

Key words: Text linguistics. Description. English language teaching. Text types.

### RESUMEN

Este artículo se presenta con la intención de ofrecer un resumen de las características más específicas de la descripción, su combinación frecuente con la narración, y algunos de los mecanismos que garantizan la cohesión y la coherencia textuales. Se incluyen también algunas sugerencias de orden didáctico y un ejercicio práctico resuelto. El artículo en su conjunto está dirigido a profesores interesados en familiarizarse con técnicas de análisis textual, tal y como requiere el Currículo Oficial del Principado de Asturias para la Educación Secundaria Obligatoria y Post-Obligatoria.

Palabras clave: Lingüística textual. Descripción. Enseñanza de la lengua inglesa. Tipos de texto.

UNESCO: 570111, 570512, 580203, 580302, 620205.

\* La autora es miembro del Grupo de Investigación "Estudios Anglo-Asturianos" (<http://www.uniovi.es/vinv/grupos/>), dentro de cuyas líneas de trabajo se enmarca el presente artículo. Parte de la labor investigadora conducente a la publicación del mismo se ha llevado a cabo en la Universidad de Hull (RU), con ayuda de la subvención AYP-02-503 de la Universidad de Oviedo.

## INTRODUCTION

---

Text analysis is a field of applied language study which has lately been introduced in the Spanish school curricula, both national and autonomous, and this from very early stages in the educational system (1). As a consequence, most Spanish schoolchildren now have plenty of opportunities to become familiarised with the different types of texts, and are soon able to identify the main characteristics of the most important of those, namely descriptive and narrative texts. This growing interest in texts and their classification, as present in most modern language manuals within a wide range of levels (from primary school to school-leaving stage), can naturally be taken advantage of in the EFL classroom, which will be my specific concern along the paragraphs that follow (2). A basic approach to the nature and features of descriptive texts, which might hopefully be of interest to EFL teachers, will lead me into suggesting some practical tasks to be implemented in an EFL class which might (but not necessarily) be acquainted with essential knowledge about texts and their types in Spanish. Said practical tasks are of a fairly 'general' type; I thus leave it to the classroom EFL teacher to adapt them to their particular needs. Before dealing specifically with description and descriptive texts, brief mention should be made of two of the most important factors that make up textuality: namely, cohesion and coherence (3).

As is well known, the unity of a text manifests itself at different levels: text sentences are linked above all by grammatical and lexical means, sometimes termed *cotext*. Cohesion is, for instance, what allows language users to fill in the gaps successfully, in any given text, even if it is unknown to them. Said gaps may be filled in either with function words (prepositions, conjunctions, etc.) or with lexical words (adjectives, nouns, etc.). As a quick practical demonstration, suitable EFL students can be asked to guess the missing words in this text:

### *Text 1. Try to fill in the gaps*

My \_\_\_\_\_ is on the third floor. \_\_\_\_\_ has a bedroom, a bathroom, and \_\_\_\_\_ living-room together \_\_\_\_\_ kitchen in one single room. \_\_\_\_\_ living room is quite large. \_\_\_\_\_ has a shower, \_\_\_\_\_ sink and \_\_\_\_\_.

The likely result of the classroom task above is that most, if not all EFL learners will have been able to guess the missing words in the text suggested. And the explanation for this is that they were able to because the text is *cohesive*. Students will have added both content words (*flat, bathroom, etc.*) and function words (*with, a, the etc.*), the resulting text making sense thanks to the different cohesive devices used. Implementation of the exercise would also show, in all probability, that individual students' answers largely coincide, or are at least equivalent.

But let us now try the same task with a different text:

*Text 2. Try to fill in the gaps*

I mean, I will talk about \_\_\_\_\_ dormitory. \_\_\_\_\_ probably know \_\_\_\_\_ about \_\_\_\_\_. We clean \_\_\_\_\_ every day. \_\_\_\_\_ never comes late. But \_\_\_\_\_ always wait outside.

Contrary to what happened in the previous exercise, gap filling is hardly possible at all in Text 2, the explanation being that such text (?) shows no cohesion—even though the individual sentences that comprise it may be perfectly correct and fully grammatical. A hypothetical completed text (if any) would surely be lacking in overall sense. Furthermore, class implementation would in all probability show students' answers widely differing among each other. In short, sentences in Text 1 are linked and prompt us to interpret them as belonging together (*i.e.*, cohesion); those in Text 2 fail to give us that impression of belonging together (*i.e.*, lack of cohesion).

While cohesion refers to formal links, coherence refers to semantics and pragmatics. Coherence means continuity of concepts and relations in texts. Let us, in this light, consider a new example:

*Text 3. Is this coherent?*

'I like them corpulent,' Leslie said. 'Remember Penelope Bogan? A Mrs too.'  
'Oh, come on. That old bird of Paradise Alley! How's the exchequer, Les?'  
'One and a penny. How you fixed?'  
'Tanner.'  
'What'll it be, then? The compasses?'  
'Free cheese at the Malborough.'

(From Dylan Thomas, *The Followers*)

This is not a made-up text: As can be seen, it is an extract from a short story by a well-known contemporary writer. As it stands, the text is difficult (or nearly impossible) to understand, since its concepts are not connected, and its references have no mutual relationship. In short, the text lacks coherence, for most readers at least (4). And, in all probability, EFL classroom learners would agree with this too!

## THE DESCRIPTIVE TEXT TYPE

---

I would like to start my brief discussion of the descriptive text type by revising the notion of *description* as such. Description is defined in the Collins Cobuild English Dictionary (1998 ed.) as follows:

### *Description:*

1. A description of someone or something is an account which explains what they are or what they look like. *Police have issued a description of the man who was aged between fifty and sixty...*

2. If something is of a particular description, it belongs to the general class of items that are mentioned. *The oldest Catholic church of any description in England...*

3. You say that something is beyond description, or that it defies description to emphasize that it is very unusual, impressive, dreadful or extreme. *His face is weary beyond description.*

As Hatch further puts it, *description* refers to the look, sound, smell of something or someone (5). Readers of this article may agree with its author that describing is one of the linguistic functions most frequently performed in our daily lives (6). We are describing people, places, objects... all the time: when we are gossiping, when we simply talk about somebody or have just come back from a particular place, when we have visited someone's home or have just bought or rented one ourselves. Describing and narrating are probably the most frequent tasks language is put to in real life. As is well-known, descriptions may range from the technical-objective to the impressionistic-subjective; but that is immaterial, in the sense that our EFL students will be able to produce more or less detailed descriptions in English depending on the vocabulary they have acquired, the object or the person they have to describe and, quite crucially, on their attitude to that object or person: in all probability, if we ask students to describe their favourite celebrity, they will try to give us a more complete description than if they are asked to describe their school!

Descriptive texts are also concerned with the location of persons and things in space. For this reason they will give us information on what lies to the left or right, in the foreground or background, or they will provide us with a framework for narration.

Description, finally, does not appear to have a totally fixed pattern or set template, which is not contradictory with the fact that components can sometimes be specified for certain types of description –for example, descriptions of objects are usually organized in terms of their parts, and the functions and appearance of these parts. If we are to describe a plant, we are likely to mention the roots, the stem and the leaves, and, perhaps, buds and flowers as well. We might also give the functions performed by these parts (transporting water, support of the plant, etc.). Colour and

shape of leaves might also be mentioned. Our description would probably start at the 'bottom' with the roots and end at the 'top' with the leaves. In short, we normally organise the components of our descriptions on a spatial ground. But sometimes we also describe, directly or indirectly, our *feelings* about the people, the objects or places referred to by ourselves or by others. Let us consider these two texts in the light of the preceding discussion:

### *Description 1*

The room is at 241 on the ground in Building 6. There are two beds in it, and there are two desks, a book-shelf and two chairs in it. The window opens to the North. My desk and bed are on the right. There is a lamp under the ceiling. The book-shelf stands near the window in the middle of the wall. There are two pictures on the left wall and there is a calendar on the wall near the window.

### *Description 2*

My room is at 241 on the ground in Building 6. Fortunately, there are two beds in it, and also two desks, only one book-shelf and two old chairs. Unfortunately, the window opens to the North. My desk and bed are on the left. There is a horrible lamp under the ceiling. The small book-shelf stands near the window in the middle of the wall. There are two beautiful pictures on the left wall and there is a useful calendar on the wall near the cold window.

The differences between these descriptions as given by, say, two room-mates are quite clear: the first description is technical-objective (referential) while the second is more subjective (expressive) (7). But a lot can be guessed about these two room-mates. For instance, the author of Description 1 does not seem to feel much identified with the room or with the person she is sharing it with, whereas the author of Description 2 does give a lot of information about her attitude to her partner and to the room they share.

## **LANGUAGE PATTERNS**

---

Descriptive texts normally focus on objects and situations and how they relate to one another. A general aspect of the matters to be described or a particular point of view thus tend to provide the organizing principle for the sender's presentation: this means that the choice of appropriate language for a descriptive type of text is (partly) a matter of convention, but naturally of individual preference as well, since senders can flout many conventional patterns if they think this will help them achieve their

goal. With this important proviso, I will now summarize the main features we in principle may expect to find in most descriptions.

First, it may be stated that in descriptions one is likely to find certain specific *syntactic structures*. For example, we may expect to find:

- Copula (*be* link) sentences: *The room is at... It is tidy and clean.*
- Relative clauses: *There is a table lamp which was assigned by the college.*
- Prepositional and adverbial clauses (for instance in locating objects within a room or shifting focus from one part of the room to another): *To the right we have an armchair.*
- Existential-there sentences or presentatives (mostly used to list people, animals, objects ...): *There were three cats and two dogs outside the house.*
- Cleft sentences (when we want to emphasize something, other than the verb): *It was to the left that the tower stood.*
- Adverbials, introduced by prepositions like *with* and *in*, which are equivalent to relative clauses: *A woman with blue eyes and brown hair (=A woman who has blue eyes and brown hair) . A man in a grey jacket (=A man who is wearing a grey jacket.).*
- Comparative structures: *The flat is smaller than their house.*

Secondly, from a *morphological* point of view the standard descriptive template is likewise predictable as for these elements:

- Perfect and progressive verb forms (they typically give background information): *He was peacefully dreaming when the fire broke out.*
- Use of definite articles for such information as considered 'given' or taken for granted even if not previously mentioned: *The fridge is by the door* (It would be odd to say: *There is a fridge, and there is a door, and the fridge is by the door*) (8).
- Use of compound adjectives which are also equivalent to the *with/in/relative* clause expressions: *a blue-eyed, brown haired woman (=a woman that has blue eyes, with brown hair, etc.).*
- Intensifiers like *very, pretty, too, rather, quite..* premodifying adjectives and adverbs: *It was very cold outside; the house was pretty cold, too .*

## VOCABULARY

---

As mentioned above, the vocabulary connected with descriptive texts depends to a great extent on the degree of subjectivity of the speaker or writer, his or her creativity, willingness to give detailed information, and general knowledge of the world. It also depends of course on the nature of the object, place, animal or person described. The following is a (naturally not exhaustive) list of semantic fields with a sample of their associated lexicon as most commonly associated with descriptions of people's appearance:



*Shapes:* round, oval, long, short...

*Sizes:* large, small, big, tiny, enormous, broad, narrow, huge...

*Colours:* blue, reddish, greenish-blue...

*Numbers and expressions of quantity:* one, the second, a great amount, a lot ...

*Positions:* in front of, on my left, behind, not far from, high above...

*Hair:* long, medium length, straight, curly, short, wavy, dark, fair, going grey, thinning, bald, white...

*Eyes:* cow-eyed, greenish blue, hazel...

*Mouth:* wide, generous, thin lips, full lips...

*Nose:* long, turned up, pointed...

*Chin:* pointed, firm, weak...

*Build:* thin, slender, slim, muscular, heavily-built, plump, overweight, fat...

*Height:* tall, of medium height, short...

*Age:* young, middle-aged, elderly, old, in his early thirties, in her mid-fifties, in their late forties...

*Personal qualities:* serious, cheerful, worried, friendly...

*General appearance:* good-looking, pretty, beautiful, handsome, attractive, plain, well-dressed, casually dressed...

Some of the categories in the preceding list are a reminder of the fact that many qualifying adjectives and quite a few classifying adjectives are commonly associated with description. As is well known, these adjectives are serially organised so that their position with respect to the noun they qualify or quantify is not random but follows rather strict rules in English (9). In addition to this, if we think of the many adverbs of manner that are used to describe actions, we come to an interesting point which I would like to emphasize before ending this essay. The word *action* is not normally associated with description but with narration. And here comes the interesting point: namely, the necessary relationship which often takes place between two or even more different text types. As admitted by most authors, texts are rarely pure realizations of a single type. Combinations are quite frequent. And the type which most often combines with the descriptive text type is apparently the narrative text type: as mentioned above, descriptive texts often serve, in fact, to give background information for the narration of events (10).

## **SOME ALTERNATIVES**

---

It is a fact that in many EFL textbooks some of the most popular writing assignments calling for description include topics like "Write about your favourite person/your best friend" or "Describe your house/your room/this school" (11). These may be good exercises as such but, since many of our students (for the curricular reasons mentioned above) are likely to have done similar ones in their Spanish courses, such assignments might not be found particularly stimulating. If I could

suggest any others, I would favour alternatives like: “Describe yourself”, “Describe the person you hate most” or “Describe a celebrity you dislike.” Another possibility consists simply in presenting the EFL class with objects or pictures and asking the students to describe them, either in pairs or in groups, or even the whole group with teacher guidance. It is interesting to note, finally, that when students are asked to write a description individually, they often write a *narrative* instead—in other words, they tell a story about themselves in relation to the object they had been asked to describe. Contrary to that, it may also happen that when we ask students to tell us *what happened*, they might tell us indeed, but the result is often less narrative than descriptive! Sounder theory, and frequent controlled practice, is probably what is called for, with a view to improving the EFL learners’ grasp of this very important aspect of the language, as required in fact by legislation in force and by sheer logic. It is hoped that this brief study might have contributed to that end.

## APPENDIX

---

‘Two young men came down the hill of Rutland Square. One of them was just 1  
bringing a long monologue to a close. The other, who walked on the verge of the  
path and was at times obliged to step on to the road, owing to his companion’s  
rudeness, wore an amused listening face. He was squat and ruddy. A yachting  
cap was shoved far back from his forehead and the narrative to which he 5  
listened made constant waves of expression break forth over his face from the  
corners of his nose and eyes and mouth. Little jets of wheezing laughter  
followed one after another out of his convulsed body. His eyes, twinkling with  
cunning enjoyment, glanced at every moment towards his companion’s face.  
Once or twice he rearranged the light waterproof which he had slung over his 10  
shoulder in toreador fashion. His breeches, his white rubber shoes and his  
jauntily slung waterproof expressed youth. But his figure fell into rotundity at  
the waist, his hair was scant and grey and his face, when the waves of  
expression had passed over it, had a ravaged look.’

“Two Gallants”, from *Dubliners*, by James Joyce

### Questions on the text

1. Analyse the different devices used in this text to describe *appearance*.
2. Can you find any examples of grammatical or lexical devices used to achieve *cohesion*?

## Suggested answers

### Question 1: Appearance.

#### 1. Adjectives:

- a) Classifying: constant, (6), little (7).
- b) Qualifying: young (1), long (2) squat (4), ruddy (4), cunning (9), light (10).
- c) -ing adjectives (all classifying): listening (4), yachting (4) wheezing (7).
- d) -ed adjectives (all qualifying): amused (4), convulsed (8), ravaged (14).
- e) Colour adjectives: white (11), grey (13).

#### Semantically:

- a) Adjectives referring to physical appearance: young (1), squat (4).
  - b) Adjectives referring to attitude: amused (4), listening (4).
2. Nouns formed after adjectives + -ness, preceded by possessive adjectives: his rudeness (3-4).
3. Clauses: A yachting cap was shoved far back from his forehead (4-5).  
...waves of expression break forth over his face (6).  
His figure fell into rotundity (12).  
His hair was scant and grey (13).  
His face... had a ravaged look (14).
4. Manner expressions:
- a) Prepositional phrases: In toreador fashion (11) (also intertextuality); with cunning enjoyment (9).
  - b) Adverbs: jauntily (12).

### Question 2: Cohesion

#### 1. Grammatical

- a) Use of deictic words for reference: anaphoric words: he, which, his, it; substitution: One of them: the other; one after another (1, 2, 8)
- b) Parallel structures: his nose, and eyes, and mouth (7); his breeches, his white rubber shoes and his ... (11-12); his figure fell..., his hair was..., his face... (12-14).
- c) Ellipsis: his nose, and eyes, and mouth (7) His eyes (which were) twinkling with enjoyment (8).

## 2. Lexical

- a) Collocation: young/men; down/hill (1); walk/path; cap/forehead (5).
- b) Idioms: bring a monologue to a close (2).
- c) Semantic fields:
  - Clothes: breeches (11), rubber shoes (12), waterproof (12) ...
  - Body parts: hair (12), face (13), waist (13) ...
  - Outdoors: hill (1), square (1), walk (2), verge (2), path (3), step (3), road (3) ...

## NOTES

- (1) The Spanish Ministry of Education's Royal Decree 3473 (29.12.00) sets the Minimum Curricular Requirements for Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO), and includes "identifying different types of texts: descriptive, narrative, conversational etc" among the communicative skills to be acquired by foreign language students since First Year. As for the School-leaving Stage (Bachillerato), minimum requirements set by Royal Decree 3473 (29 December, 2000) likewise include "descriptions and narratives based on personal experience" among the language abilities to be acquired by First Year students of foreign languages. In a similar fashion, the Official Curriculum set for Secondary Education by the Principality of Asturias makes specific mention of "simple descriptions of familiar people, places and things, based on visual stimuli", and also of "brief narratives of events and simple sketches" (Principality Decree 70/2002). As for the School-leaving Stage, the Principality curriculum includes "detailed description of places" and of "the physical and psychological characteristics of someone" among the learning requirements officially set for First Year students of English. See further Laspra (1992: 13-60).
- (2) Text analysis is also included in the Spanish Language school curricula. In this article, reference will be made to types of texts in English; likewise, application will be to the general EFL classroom. However, for those wishing to become acquainted with text types and their application in Spanish, see Bassols and Torrent (1997).
- (3) Cohesion and coherence (together with the rest of textuality standards) are best treated by Beaugrande and Dressler in their classic 1986 book (48-208); see also Cook (1989) for classroom applications. As for text types, a variety of authors can be used: Burton and Humphries (1992: 167-200), Esser (1993: 69-96), Georgakopoulou and Goutsos (1999: 39-54), Gramley and Pätzold (1992: 182-202), Hatch (1992: 164-99, with interesting applications), Thorne (1997: 430-49), Werlich (1982: 39-41, 46-132), etc.
- (4) It should be remembered that, being of a semantic-pragmatic nature, coherence very much lies *in our minds*, which leads us directly to the notion of schemata: see further Cook (1989: 68-78, with examples), Cook (1994: 9-22 especially), Georgakopoulou and Goutsos (1999: 26-31), and Yule (1996: 85-87).
- (5) Hatch (1992: 164).

- (6) In this sense, describing is probably best seen as a function associated to the referential macrofunction of language, and sometimes to the expressive macrofunction as well: see Cook (1994: 39) for different classifications of the (macro) functions of language and their correlations.
- (7) See note 6 above.
- (8) The important 'given' vs. 'new' distinction links naturally with the functional concepts of 'theme' and 'rheme', 'topic' and 'focus' etc: see for instance Gramley and Pätzold (1992: 153-54).
- (9) Most grammars have a section showing details about the position of adjectives in noun groups: see for instance Sinclair ed. (1990: 74-6).
- (10) See the Appendix below for an example of a narrative-descriptive mixture, and its analysis, as present in the same text. It is accompanied by two broad questions designed with a view to eliciting responses on the (mixed) nature of the text and its main features. An answer key is also provided. EFL teachers are welcome to try it out with suitable learners, maybe as a class exercise on text types.
- (11) The following are real examples: "Describing a picture", "Describing your favourite part of town", "Describing a career", all from the textbook by Liz & John Soars *New Headway English Course. Upper-Intermediate*. (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 61, 67, 126 respectively.

## REFERENCES

- Bassols, Margarida and Anna M. Torrent. 1997. *Modelos textuales. Teoría y práctica*. Barcelona: Octaedro.
- Beaugrande, Robert de and Wolfgang Dressler. 1986. *Introduction to Text Linguistics*. London: Longman.
- Burton, S.H. and J.A. Humphries. 1992. *Mastering English Language*. London: Mac-Millan.
- Cook, Guy. 1989. *Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Cook, Guy. 1994. *Discourse and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Esser, Jürgen. 1993. *English Linguistic Stylistics*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Georgakopoulou, Alexandra and Dionysis Goutsos. 1999. *Discourse Analysis*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- Gramley, Stephan and Kurt-Michael Pätzold. 1992. *A Survey of Modern English*. London: Routledge.
- Hatch, Evelyn. 1992. *Discourse and Language Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

- Laspra Rodríguez, Alicia. 1992. *La formación inicial de profesorado de Enseñanza Secundaria. Área de Inglés*. Murcia: Universidad, Instituto de Ciencias de la Educación.
- Sinclair, John, ed. 1990. *Collins Cobuild English Grammar*. London: Longman, 1990.
- Thorne, Sara. 1997. *Mastering Advanced English Language*. London: MacMillan.
- Werlich, Egon. 1982. *A Text Grammar of English*. Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer.
- Yule, George. 1996. *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford UP.