

Pragmatic Concerns And Levels Of Competence In English Language Teaching And Communication Skills

Running Title: Pragmatic Concerns And Levels Of Competence

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Abstract

Pragmatics is the way we convey meaning through communication. The meaning includes verbal and non-verbal elements and it varies according to the context, the relationship between utterers, also to many other social factors. Communication means the exchange of information, ideas, feelings and thoughts. The type of communication which is used in the corporate world is business communication. It is not a mere exchange of ideas. In the world of business, the communication system is considered effective, only if there is some positive transaction. If the sender of information is just able to convey the message without any fruitful deal, then the communication is not effective. A person is considered employable only when he gets the necessary higher qualification, experience, interest, learning attitude and expertise in the field where he wants to seek employment. Language teaching should be based on the idea that the goal of language acquisition is communicative competence: the ability to use the language correctly and appropriately to accomplish communication goals. The desired outcome of the language learning process is the ability to communicate competently, *not* the ability to use the language exactly as a native speaker does. Communicative competence is made up of four competence areas: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic. The communicative competence model balances these extremes. The model recognizes that overt grammar instruction helps students acquire the language more efficiently, but it incorporates grammar teaching and learning into the larger context of teaching students to use the language. Language learning is a process of discovery and as such newer models are always being brought forward. The learner develops the ability to use the language for specific communication purposes. In this learner-centred model, both student and teacher are active participants who share responsibility for the student's learning.

Keywords: Curriculum Development, Foreign Language Teaching, Intercultural Competence, Interlanguage Pragmatics, Pragmatic Competence.

Introduction

The term 'pragmatics' is derived from the same Greek word *pragma*, meaning action, from which our words 'practice' and 'practical' come.¹ Pragmatism is a practical, matter-of-fact way of approaching or assessing situations or solving problems. It is an action or policy dictated by consideration of the immediate practical consequences rather than by any theory. It is the study of the language used in context. According to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, pragmatism is "action or policy dictated by consideration of the immediate practical consequences rather than by theory or dogma."² According to the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* "Pragmatism is a philosophical movement that includes those who claim that an ideology or proposition is true if it works satisfactorily, that the meaning of a proposition is to be found in the practical consequences of accepting it, and that unpractical ideas are to be rejected

Pragmatists emphatically declare that philosophy must be 'practical' and that practicality consists of dispensing with all absolute principles and standards—that there is no such thing as objective reality or permanent truth—that 'truth is that which works, and its validity can be judged only by its consequences—that no facts can be known with certainty in advance, and anything may be tried by rule-of-thumb—that reality is not firm, but fluid and "indeterminate," that there is no such thing as a distinction between an external world and a consciousness (between the perceived and the perceiver), there is only an undifferentiated package-deal labelled "experience," and whatever one wishes to be true, is true, whatever one wishes to exist, does exist, provided it works or makes one feel better. Pragmatism holds that truth is modified as discoveries are made and are relative to the time, place and purpose of the inquiry. In its ethical aspect, pragmatism holds that knowledge that contributes to human values is real and that values play an essential role in the choice of means employed to attain an end as they do in the choice of the end itself.

William James held that in vital matters of faith, the criterion for acceptance was the will to believe, and he was the key figure in promoting the widespread influence of pragmatism during the 1890s and early 1900s. John Dewey (1859-1952) in his works developed the instrumentalist aspects of the doctrine. In a philosophy he called Instrumentalism, John Dewey attempted to combine both Pierce's and James' philosophies of Pragmatism. It was thus both about logical concepts as well as ethical analysis. Instrumentalism describes Dewey's ideas as the conditions under which reasoning and inquiry occur. On the one hand, it should be controlled by logical constraints; on the other hand, it is directed at producing goods and valued satisfactions.

Dewey distinguished himself from James over a technical but crucial difference in their notions of truth and divinity. Dewey identified two working notions of truth in *Pragmatism*. The first deals with *ideas as ideas*. He set it against the *truths*, where the meaning of the object and the idea is assumed to be already ascertained. The truth of an *idea* is discovered as it sets about working through 'the stream of experience.

Linguistic pragmatics is a branch of linguistics concerned with the use of language in social contexts and how people produce and comprehend meanings through language. The use of pragmatics in the context of language and linguistics was first made by the American philosopher Charles Morris (1901-1979). After studying engineering and psychology, he earned a Bachelor of Science degree at Northwestern University in 1922. Deciding that his primary interests were philosophical, Morris became a student of pragmatist George Herbert Mead at the University of Chicago. In his dissertation titled 'Symbolism and Reality: A Study likea Mind' (Morris 1925) and articles published during the 1930s, Morris assembled a synthesis of the semiotics of Charles Peirce, the social behaviourism of Dewey and Mead, and the logical positivism of Rudolf Carnap and Otto Neurath. Morris quickly rose to a prominent position in American philosophy. Morris organized the Fifth and Sixth International Congresses for the Unity of Science (1939 and 1941). His relationships with German philosophers were essential to bringing many of them to America during World War II. Morris held academic appointments as an instructor in philosophy at the Rice Institute in Texas (1925-31), an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago (1931-47), a lecturer at the University of Chicago (1948-58) and a research professor at the University of Florida (1958-71). Morris was a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and served as President of the Western Division of the American Philosophical Association from 1936-37. Morris died on 15 January 1979 in Gainesville, Florida.

Pragmatics is thus the study of how both literal and nonliteral aspects of communicated linguistic meaning are determined by principles that refer to the physical or social context (broadly construed) in which language is used. The content knowledge in the area of his choice is the primary requirement. The necessary experience, if not, the interest and the attitude to learn the job assignments are much sought after by employers. A person has to remain employable throughout one's career. Unless one is ready to update his knowledge in the field of work according to the ongoing changes and advancements, he lags behind others and loses his job ultimately. Effective communication includes the ability to communicate effectively in any language. Academicians and researchers are divided in their opinion on the question; is English required for successful business communication? Is it not possible to communicate effectively in regional languages and get the work done? Those who are in favour of English for effective communication would say that English is the official language in most companies in cities these days.

Thus, competence in English remains in demand all the time. However, people who vote for regional languages for communication over English would rather say that English is not required as long as one communicates effectively to get the work done. The customers, for most of the products and services, are people of a particular region where a local language is spoken. So what big deal is in speaking in English to woo and impress them? After all, when it is a matter of money, people would rather concentrate on quality and service for the products than the customer care executive's ability to speak in English.

Language learning is a process of discovery and as such newer models are always being brought forward. The learner develops the ability to use the language for specific communication purposes. Teacher models language use and facilitates students' development of language skills. In this learner-centred model, both student and teacher are active participants who share responsibility for the student's learning. Instructors and students work together to identify how students expect to use the language. The instructor models correct and appropriate language use, and students then use the language themselves in practice activities that simulate real communication situations. The active, joint engagement of students and teachers leads to a dynamic classroom environment in which teaching and learning become rewarding and enjoyable.

Language instructors who have never experienced learner-centered instruction can find it daunting in several ways.

- a. It requires more preparation time: Instructors must consider students' language learning goals, identify classroom activities that will connect those with the material presented in the textbook, and find appropriate real-world materials to accompany them
- b. It is mysterious: It's not clear what, exactly, an instructor does to make a classroom learner-centred

- c. It feels like it isn't going to work: When students first are invited to participate actively, they may be slow to get started as they assess the tasks and figure out classroom dynamics
- d. It feels chaotic: Once students start working in small groups, the classroom becomes noisy and the instructor must be comfortable with the idea that students may make mistakes that are not heard and corrected
- e. It sounds like a bad idea: The phrase "learner-centered" makes it sound as though the instructor is not in control of the classroom

This final point is an important one. In fact, in an effective learner-centered classroom, the instructor has planned the content of all activities, has set time limits on them and has set them in the context of instructor-modelled language use. The instructor is not always the centre of attention but is still in control of students' learning activities.

Language teaching should be based on the idea that the goal of language acquisition is communicative competence: the ability to use the language correctly and appropriately to accomplish communication goals. The desired outcome of the language learning process is the ability to communicate competently, *not* the ability to use the language exactly as a native speaker does.

Communicative competence is made up of four competence areas: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic.

- *Linguistic competence* is knowing how to use the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of a language. Linguistic competence asks: What words do I use? How do I put them into phrases and sentences?
- *Sociolinguistic competence* is knowing how to use and respond to language appropriately, given the setting, the topic, and the relationships among the people communicating. Sociolinguistic competence asks: Which words and phrases fit this setting and this topic? How can I express a specific attitude (courtesy, authority, friendliness, respect) when I need to? How do I know what attitude another person is expressing?
- *Discourse competence* is knowing how to interpret the larger context and how to construct longer stretches of language so that the parts make up a coherent whole. Discourse competence asks: How are words, phrases and sentences put together to create conversations, speeches, email messages, and newspaper articles?
- *Strategic competence* is knowing how to recognize and repair communication breakdowns, how to work around gaps in one's knowledge of the language, and how to learn more about the language and in context. Strategic competence asks: How do I know when I've misunderstood or when someone has misunderstood me? What do I say then? How can I express my ideas if I don't know the name of something or the right verb form to use?

In the early stages of language learning, instructors and students may want to keep in mind the goal of communicative efficiency. Learners should be able to make themselves understood, using their current proficiency to the fullest. They should try to avoid confusion in the message (due to faulty pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary); avoid offending communication partners (due to socially inappropriate style), and to use strategies for recognizing and managing communication breakdowns.

In language classrooms in the United States, instruction focuses on the learner and the learning process. The instructor creates a learning environment that resembles as much as possible the one in which students learned their first language. Students participate in the learning process by establishing learning goals, developing and choosing learning strategies, and evaluating their own progress. In the classroom, students attend to models provided by the instructor (input) and then build on those models as they use the language themselves (output). Classroom activities incorporate real-world situations.

Learner-centred instruction encourages students to take responsibility for their language skill development and helps them gain confidence in their ability to learn and use the language. Teachers support students by devoting some class time to non-traditional activities, including teaching learners how to use learning strategies, how to use available tools and resources, and how to reflect on their own learning.

Many students have had experience with learner-centered instruction and expect it to be used in their classrooms. Students who are accustomed to more traditional teacher-centred instruction may resist the learner-centred model at first because it expects them to be more involved in the learning process. However, when they discover that learner-centred instruction enables them to develop real-world language skills while having fun, they usually become enthusiastic participants.

For proper language acquisition by the students opting for admission abroad, certain guidelines are here provided;

1. Provide Appropriate Input

Input is the language to which students are exposed: teacher talk, listening activities, reading passages, and the language heard and read outside of class. Input gives learners the material they need to develop their ability to use the language on their own. Language input has two forms. *Finely tuned* input

- a. is matched to learners' current comprehension level and connected to what they already know
- b. focuses on conscious learning of a specific point: the pronunciation of a word, the contrast in the uses of two verb tenses, new vocabulary, useful social formulas

- c. is controlled by the instructor or textbook author
- d. is used in the presentation stage of a lesson

On the other hand, roughly tuned input

- a. Is more complex than learners' current proficiency and stretches the boundaries of their current knowledge
- b. Focuses on authentic use of language in listening or reading passages
- c. Is used "as is," with minimal alteration by the instructor or textbook author
- d. Is used in the activity stage of the lesson

Roughly tuned input challenges students to use listening and reading strategies to aid comprehension. When selecting authentic materials for use as roughly tuned input, look for listening and reading selections that are one level of proficiency higher than students' current level. This will ensure that students will be challenged by the material without being overwhelmed by its difficulty.

2. Use Language in Authentic Ways

To learn a language, instead of merely learning about it, students need as much as possible to hear and read the language as native speakers use it. Instructors can make this happen in two ways.

Teacher talk: Always try to use the language as naturally as possible when you are talking to students. Slowing down may seem to make the message more comprehensible, but it also distorts the subtle shifts in pronunciation that occur in naturally paced speech.

- a. Speak at a normal rate
- b. Use vocabulary and sentence structures with which students are familiar
- c. State the same idea in different ways to aid comprehension

Give students authentic reading material from newspapers, magazines, and other print sources. To make them accessible,

- a. Review them carefully to ensure that the reading level is appropriate
- b. Introduce relevant vocabulary and grammatical structures in advance
- c. Provide context by describing the content and typical formats for the type of material (for example, arrival and departure times for travel schedules)

Advertisements, travel brochures, packaging, and street signs contain short statements that students at lower levels can manage. The World Wide Web is a rich resource for authentic materials. Reading authentic materials motivates students at all levels because it gives them the sense that they can use the language.

3. Provide Context

Context includes knowledge of the topic or content, the vocabulary and language structures in which the content is usually presented, and the social and cultural expectations associated with the content

To help students have an authentic experience of understanding and using language, prepare them by raising their awareness of the context in which it occurs.

- a. Ask them what they know about the topic
- b. Ask what they can predict from the title or heading of a reading selection or the opening line of a listening selection
- c. Review the vocabulary (including idiomatic expressions) and sentence structures that are usually found in that type of material
- d. Review relevant social and cultural expectations

4. Design Activities with a Purpose

Ordinarily, communication has a purpose: to convey information. Activities in the language classroom simulate communication outside the classroom when they are structured with such a purpose. In these classroom activities, students use the language to fill an information gap by getting answers or expanding a partial understanding. For example, students work in pairs, and each is given half of a map, grid, or list needed to complete a task. The pair then talk to each other until they both have all the information.

5. Use Task-based Activities

Fluent speakers use language to perform tasks such as solving problems, developing plans, and working together to complete projects. The use of similar task-based activities in the classroom is an excellent way to encourage students to use the language. Tasks may involve solving a word problem, creating a crossword puzzle, making a video, preparing a presentation, or drawing up a plan.

6. Encourage Collaboration

Whenever possible, ask students to work in pairs or small groups. Give students structure in the form of a defined task and outcome. This structure will allow students to collaborate as they develop a work plan, discuss the substance of the

task, and report the outcome. They will thus use language in a variety of ways and learn from each other. Effective collaborative activities have three characteristics.

- a. Communication gap: Each student has relevant information that the others don't have
- b. Task orientation: The activity has a defined outcome, such as solving a problem or drawing a map
- c. Time limit: Students have a preset amount of time to complete the task

7. Use an Integrated Approach

Integration has two forms. Mode integration is the combination of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in classroom activities. By asking students to use two or more modes, instructors create activities that imitate real-world language use. Content integration is bringing content from students' fields of study into the language curriculum. University students often find it instructive to read, discuss, and write about material whose content they already know, because their knowledge of the topic helps them understand and use the language. They can scaffold: to build on existing knowledge as they increase their language proficiency. For students who plan to study and/or work in a field that will require them to use the language they are learning, integration of content can be a powerful motivator.

8. Address Grammar Consciously

University students usually need and appreciate direct instruction in points of grammar that are related to classroom activities. These students often know the rules associated with the standard use of their native language (metalinguistic knowledge) and can benefit from the development of similar knowledge in the target language and discussion of similarities and differences.

Discuss points of grammar in the contexts where they arise. Asking students to think through a rule in the context of an effort to express themselves is a more effective way of helping them internalize the rule than teaching the rule in isolation. Two types of grammar rules should be addressed when using authentic materials:

- a. Prescriptive rules: State how the language "should" or "must" be used; define what is "correct." These are the rules that are taught in language textbooks.
- b. Descriptive rules: State how the language is used by fluent speakers. The degree to which descriptive rules differ from prescriptive rules depends on the setting (casual/formal use of language), the topic, and the backgrounds of the speakers.

9. Adjust Feedback/Error Correction to Situation

In the parts of a lesson that focus on form, direct and immediate feedback is needed and expected. Encourage students to self-correct by waiting after they have spoken or by asking them to try again. Feedback techniques:

- a. Paraphrase a student's utterances, modelling the correct forms
- b. Ask students to clarify their utterances, providing paraphrases of their own

Avoid feeding students the correct forms every time. Gradually teaching them to depend less on you and more on themselves is what language teaching is all about.

In the parts of a lesson that focus on communication activities, the flow of talk should not be interrupted by the teacher's corrections. When students address you, react to the content of their utterances, not just the form. Your response is a useful comprehension check for students, and on the affective level, it shows that you are listening to what they say. Make note of recurring errors you hear so that you can address them with the whole group in the feedback session later.

10. Include Awareness of Cultural Aspects of Language Use

Languages are cognitive systems, but they also express ideas and transmit cultural values. When you are discussing language use with your students, it is important to include information on the social, cultural, and historical context that certain language forms carry for native speakers. Often these explanations include reference to what a native speaker would say, and why. Culture is expressed and transmitted through magazines and newspapers, radio and television programs, movies, and the internet. Using media as authentic materials in the classroom can expand students' perspectives and generate interesting discussions about the relationships between language and culture.

Learning to communicate in another language takes a long time and it is also not as easy as it may sound. It is one of the most challenging tasks your students are likely to undertake, and they can easily become discouraged and bored with it. This section presents techniques that language teachers can use to keep their students interested and motivated by helping them understand the language acquisition process, connect language learning with their larger educational and life goals, and succeed in language. To become engaged learners, students need to understand that learning a language is not the same as learning *about* a language. When students think of language as a school subject like any other, they may learn a great deal about its vocabulary, grammar, and sentence and discourse structure, but the language will not become a true medium of communication for them and won't engage them very deeply. Students need to understand that learning a language means becoming able to use it to comprehend, communicate, and think – as they do in their first language. Students also need to recognize that language learning takes place in stages. Interpretive skills (listening, reading)

develop much more quickly than expressive skills (speaking, writing), and the ability that students covet most – the ability to speak the second language fluently – requires the longest period of growth.

All language learners have to work through a sequence of "approximate" versions called interlanguages (ILs), each of which represents a level of understanding of the target language. Understanding the features of ILs can help teachers and learners understand and monitor the language learning process.

Uniqueness: Interlanguages vary significantly from learner to learner in the early stages of language learning. Learners impose rules of their own on the oral and written input they receive. Each learner does this differently, combining an emerging understanding of the rules of the new language with ideas derived from the first language and other information that comes from their situations and backgrounds.

Systematicity: As learners begin to develop proficiency in a language, they make errors in systematic ways. For example, once students learn the inflections for a single class of verbs, they may apply them to all classes indiscriminately. These errors are based on systematic assumptions, or false rules, about the language. When students become aware of this aspect of their language skill development, they often appreciate and even ask for overt error correction from the instructor.

Fossilization: Some false rules become more firmly imprinted on the IL than others and are harder for learners to overcome. Fossilization results when these false rules become permanent features of a learner's use of the language.

Convergence: As learners' rules come to approximate more closely those of the language they are learning, convergence sets in. This means that learners who come from different native language backgrounds make similar assumptions and formulate similar hypotheses about the rules of the new language, and therefore make similar errors. Instructors can help students understand the process of language skill development in several ways.

- a. Focus on interlanguage as a natural part of language learning; remind them that they learned their first language this way.
- b. Point out that the systematic nature of interlanguage can help students understand why they make errors. They can often predict when they will make errors and what types of errors they will make.
- c. Keep the overall focus of the classroom on communication, not error correction. Use overt correction only in structured output activities.
- d. Technical students that mistakes are learning opportunities. When their errors interfere with their ability to communicate, they must develop strategies for handling the misunderstanding that results.

If you maintain the attitude that mistakes are a natural part of learning, you will create a supportive environment where students are willing to try to use the language even though their mastery of forms is imperfect.

Grammar is central to the teaching and learning of languages. It is also one of the more difficult aspects of language to teach well. Many people, including language teachers, hear the word "grammar" and think of a fixed set of word forms and rules of usage. They associate "good" grammar with the prestige forms of the language, such as those used in writing and formal oral presentations, and "bad" or "no" grammar with the language used in everyday conversation or used by speakers of non-prestige forms. Language teachers who adopt this definition focus on grammar as a set of forms and rules. They teach grammar by explaining the forms and rules and then drilling students into them. This results in bored, disaffected students who can produce correct forms on exercises and tests, but consistently make errors when they try to use the language in context.

Other language teachers, influenced by recent theoretical work on the difference between language learning and language acquisition, tend not to teach grammar at all. Believing that children acquire their first language without overt grammar instruction, they expect students to learn their second language the same way. They assume that students will absorb grammar rules as they hear, read, and use the language in communication activities. This approach does not allow students to use one of the major tools they have as learners: their active understanding of what grammar is and how it works in the language they already know.

The communicative competence model balances these extremes. The model recognizes that overt grammar instruction helps students acquire the language more efficiently, but it incorporates grammar teaching and learning into the larger context of teaching students to use the language. Instructors using this model teach students the grammar they need to know to accomplish defined communication tasks. The goal of grammar instruction is to enable students to carry out their communication purposes. This goal has three implications: First, Students need overt instruction that connects grammar points with larger communication contexts. Second, students do not need to master every aspect of each grammar point, only those that are relevant to the immediate communication task. Finally, error correction is not always the instructor's first responsibility.

Overt Grammar Instruction

Adult students appreciate and benefit from direct instruction that allows them to apply critical thinking skills to language learning. Instructors can take advantage of this by providing explanations that give students a descriptive understanding (declarative knowledge) of each point of grammar.

- a. Teach the grammar point in the target language or the student's first language or both. The goal is to facilitate understanding.
- b. Limit the time you devote to grammar explanations to 10 minutes, especially for lower-level students whose ability to sustain attention can be limited.
- c. Present grammar points in written and oral ways to address the needs of students with different learning styles.

Relevance of Grammar Instruction

In the communicative competence model, the purpose of learning grammar is to learn the language of which the grammar is a part. Instructors, therefore, teach grammar forms and structures concerning meaning and use for the specific communication tasks that students need to complete

Error Correction

At all proficiency levels, learners produce language that is not exactly the language used by native speakers. Some of the differences are grammatical, while others involve vocabulary selection and mistakes in the selection of language appropriate for different contexts. In responding to student communication, teachers need to be careful not to focus on error correction to the detriment of communication and confidence building. Teachers need to let students know when they are making errors so that they can work on improving. Teachers also need to build students' confidence in their ability to use the language by focusing on the content of their communication rather than the grammatical form.

The Listening Process

To accomplish this goal, instructors focus on the process of listening rather than on its product.

- a. They develop students' awareness of the listening process and listening strategies by asking students to think and talk about how they listen in their native language.
- b. They allow students to practice the full repertoire of listening strategies by using authentic listening tasks.
- c. They behave as authentic listeners by responding to student communication as a listener rather than as a teacher.
- d. When working with listening tasks in class, they show students the strategies that will work best for the listening purpose and the type of text. They explain how and why students should use the strategies.
- e. They have students practice listening strategies in class and ask them to practice outside of class in their listening assignments. They encourage students to be conscious of what they're doing while they complete listening tape assignments.
- f. They encourage students to evaluate their comprehension and their strategy use immediately after completing an assignment. They build comprehension checks into in-class and out-of-class listening assignments and periodically review how and when to use particular strategies.
- g. They encourage the development of listening skills and the use of listening strategies by using the target language to conduct classroom business: making announcements, assigning homework, and describing the content and format of tests.

Integrating Metacognitive Strategies

Before listening they should be prepared for the listening task

- Set a purpose or decide in advance what to listen for
- Decide if more linguistic or background knowledge is needed
- Determine whether to enter the text from the top down (attend to the overall meaning) or from the bottom up (focus on the words and phrases)

During and after listening: Monitor comprehension

- Verify predictions and check for inaccurate guesses
- Decide what is and is not important to understand
- Listen/view again to check comprehension
- Ask for help

After listening: Evaluate comprehension and strategy use

- Evaluate comprehension in a particular task or area
- Evaluate overall progress in listening and in particular types of listening tasks
- Decide if the strategies used were appropriate for the purpose and the task
- Modify strategies if necessary

Reading as a Process

Reading is an interactive process that goes on between the reader and the text, resulting in comprehension. The text presents letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs that encode meaning. The reader uses knowledge, skills, and strategies to determine what that meaning is.

Using Authentic Materials and Approaches

For students to develop communicative competence in reading, classroom and homework reading activities must resemble (or be) real-life reading tasks that involve meaningful communication.

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