

# Why is pragmatics essential for foreign language Learners?

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### Abstract

Pragmatics considers language as an instrument of interaction, what people mean when they use language and how they communicate and understand each other. It is the study of meaning in the interactional context that looks beyond the literal meaning of an utterance and considers how meaning is constructed together with focusing on implied meanings. This tool for social influence plays a vital role for L2 learners to understand the intended meaning of utterances in a particular context. If without this knowledge, L2 learners might fail to understand a conversation produced by native speakers.

### บทคัดย่อ

วจนปฏิบัติถือว่าเป็นเครื่องมือในการสื่อสารที่แสดงถึงการมีปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างผู้พูดกับผู้ฟัง โดยที่ทั้งสองฝ่ายจะต้องเข้าใจความหมายในการสื่อสารให้ตรงกัน การศึกษาเรื่องวจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาความหมายที่แท้จริงของถ้อยความ (Utterance) ที่มีอยู่ในระหว่างการสื่อสารและเป็นการมีปฏิสัมพันธ์ร่วมกันระหว่างผู้พูดกับผู้ฟัง โดยมีความหมายแฝง (Implied meaning) ที่อยู่ในบทสนทนาสำหรับผู้เรียนภาษาที่สองที่ไม่ใช่เจ้าของภาษา จะต้องมีความรู้และเข้าใจในเรื่องวจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ เช่นเดียวกันกับเจ้าของภาษา มิฉะนั้นการสื่อความหมายที่แท้จริง (Intended meaning) อาจจะมีผิดพลาดในการสื่อความหมายที่ต้องการได้

Communication is the simple function of establishing what people wish to convey and their meanings, but what is really behind that speaker's intention? Learners of a language or English speakers attempting to merely understand phonology, morphology, and syntax will lack the necessary skills to conduct meaningful conversations since the meaning of words used in sentences and phrases is the most important aspect of language acquisition. However, communicative competence refers to both the tacit knowledge of a language and the ability to use it effectively. In the book "Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing" (Applied Linguistics,

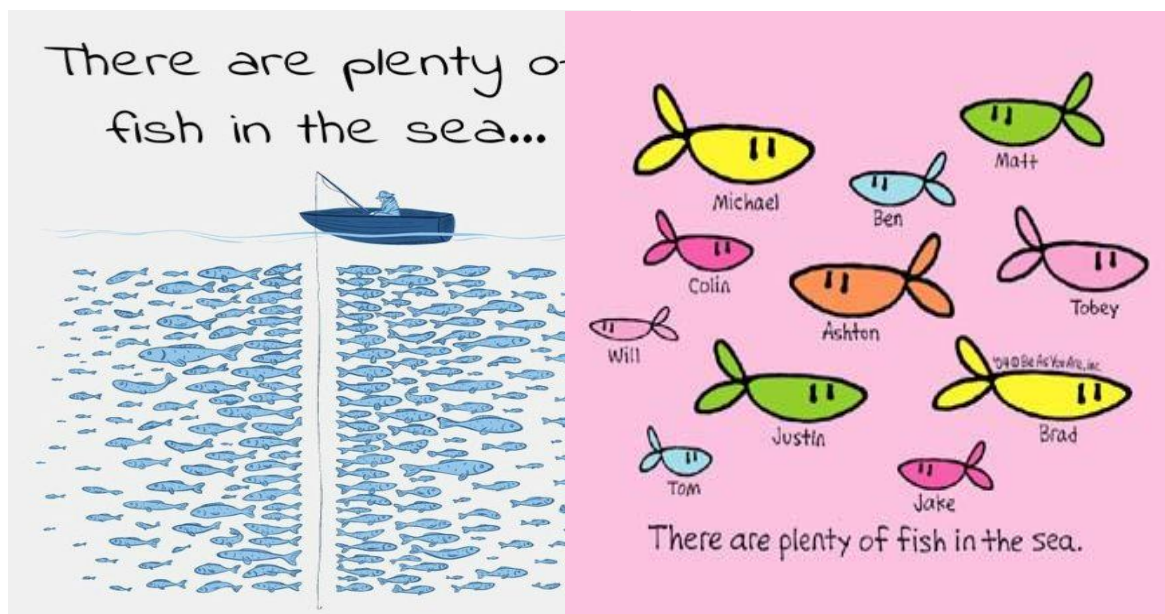
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1980), Michael Canale and Merrill Swain identified four components of communicative competence: (i) grammatical competence to include knowledge of phonology, orthography, vocabulary, word formation and sentence formation (ii) sociolinguistic competence to include knowledge of sociocultural rules of use. This competence is concerned with the learners' ability to handle such complexities as settings, topics and communicative functions in different sociolinguistic contexts. (iii) Discourse competence is related to the learners' mastery of understanding and producing texts in the modes of listening, speaking, reading and writing and it also deals with cohesion and coherence in different types of texts and (iv) strategic competence referring to compensatory strategies in the case of grammatical, sociolinguistic or discourse difficulties, such as the use of reference sources, grammatical and lexical paraphrase, requests for repetition, clarification, slower speech, or problems in addressing strangers when unsure of their social status or in finding the right cohesion devices. The statements above are naturally theoretical bases which play a vital part in supporting language learners to convey meaningful conversations. However, this paper is more practical rather than theoretical, in pointing out the roles of the pragmatics to be concerned primarily with meaning and the definition of role variations within different communicative tasks that are provided by the speaker in a way to be interpreted by a hearer or reader. Essentially, pragmatics is very closely linked with the field of semantics. Semantics is taken to mean the study of literal meaning and the making of relationships to the verbal, and the descriptions that are produced in the form of speaking and writing, while pragmatics is the study of how context affects the meaning or hidden meanings (Yule, 1996). It concerns itself with how sentences are interpreted in certain situations. These theories will be discussed in this paper entitled, "Why is pragmatics essential for foreign language learners?"

What does 'pragmatics' really mean? Specifically, it involves a speaker and a hearer engaging together to understand the intended meaning, together with the goal of communication, purposes and actions of the speaker who obviously wants to convey the contextual meaning towards the hearer based on the provided situation. Today, pragmatics plays a crucial role in language teaching assisting foreign language learners to understand intended meaning of utterances in a particular context. Without some knowledge of pragmatics, foreign language learners might fail to understand a conversation produced by native speakers. The elements of pragmatics include speech acts such as presuppositions, deixis and conversational implicatures.

An entry point might be Fraser, (1983) who defined pragmatics as it is involved in linguistic communication as that which can be communicated, how the speaker goes about accomplishing the intended communication and why certain strategies are selected under particular circumstances which bring about communication. A speech act, which is a part of pragmatics, deals with the functions, the use of language, all the acts that the addressers perform through speaking, such as requests, commands, orders, complaints and promises. Foreign language learners could misinterpret the meanings of the language for they lack the necessary background knowledge. For example, on entering a room, an English native speaker hears this sentence “You left the door open.” (Yule, 1985:102), The sentence should then be taken as an instruction to close the door. Indeed, it is an exact request, not a statement. If a foreign language learner listened to the same statement, they might not understand the speaker’s exact intention; they might misinterpret the utterance by just looking at the door that is still open. Similarly, when a foreign language learner hears a word “fish”, certainly they all understand its literal meaning; that is, a creature which lives in water, is covered with scales, and breathes by taking water in through its mouth, or the flesh of these animals eaten as food. As a matter of fact, fish contains several connotative meanings. Several examples are: a queer fish, a fish out of water, to fish something out, there are many more fish in the sea or the school director is fishing for information about our strategy (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org>) Undoubtedly, English native speakers can almost certainly understand and interpret all these sentences quite easily. A ‘queer fish’ is as a strange person. A ‘fish out of water’ means someone who is uncomfortable in a specific situation. To ‘fish something out’ could be to remove an item from its surroundings, or to make a cunning deduction. ‘There are plenty of fish in the sea’ is used to tell someone whose relationship has ended that there are many other people that they could have a relationship with (See figure) and the last sentence, ‘the school director is fishing for information about our strategy’ means that person is trying to illicit something from you without asking directly.



Aside from Fraser (1983), Crystal (1987) has expressed his ideas of pragmatics in that it deals with the factors that manage language for what they want to choose within the pool of language and it is satisfied whenever it is used within a social interaction and its effect on others. While Leech (1983) said that pragmatics is a study of meaning and the way it relates to speech in any provided situation, along with an aspect to make speech in a situation and further it paves the way to determine a core principle whether it deals with semantic or pragmatic phenomenon. Within pragmatics, Leech agreed to propose five vital aspects that are principally focused and are shown below:

1. Addressees or addressers (hearer or speaker)
2. An utterance in context, Leech emphasizes more on background knowledge that is related to the context.
3. Leech defined the goals of an utterance together with the meaning of intention towards uttering it.
4. The utterance is a form of activity or an act and the verbal utterance can also be performed like acts to mark the needs of a particular situation.
5. The utterance that is in a form of an enclosed verbal act tends to identify the real sense, not the sentences.

In addition, Austin (1962) has pointed out three different types of speech acts. All these types of utterances can be classified as the speech acts: a locutionary act, an illocutionary act, and a perlocutionary act. The first type of speech act deals with the

speaker when a certain reference sense is expressed. In this conversational context, the grammatical principle is also concerned with the speaker as a series of messages is linked that gives the expression usually for those dealing with the value of truth. An illocutionary act occurs when the speaker uses some per-informative verb to express the intentions within the sentences and a perlocutionary act deals with the effect of an action that is from a linguistic point of view. This type has quite a visible effect on the speaker when he or she conveys the meaning to the hearer such as convincing someone, insulting, surprising and persuading. The following sentence is an example of the act, "I will take you skiing for your birthday." (Fraser, 1983). Foreign language learners obviously understand this is a promise for it is a literal meaning. But if the intended meaning of this statement is to threaten someone who abhors skiing, foreign language learners might misinterpret this meaning because the actual meaning is concealed. This is an illocutionary act.

In short, pragmatics is necessary for foreign language learners as it is involved in a function and a speech act. When they lack understanding of pragmatics, the meanings of utterances are likely to be misinterpreted because people in different socio-cultural groups often behave differently. Native speakers usually make implicit assumptions when conversing. This leads to foreign language learners misinterpreting the meanings of utterances. Among native speakers' conversations, comprehension of the linguistic messages and the assumptions are possible as the speakers share assumed or prior knowledge about the addressees. The presupposition part of pragmatic has an important role in language teaching as well. Consider the following sentences:

1. Have you stopped hugging your sheepdog?
2. Who bought the badminton set?
3. Caroline doesn't write poems in the bathroom. (Fromkin 1996:224)

In the English language, native speakers always take turns when speaking and these three sentences are clearly understood by them. They have presupposed that the listener in sentence 1 has in the past hugged his sheepdog. In sentence 2, there is the presupposition that somebody has already bought a badminton set, while in sentence 3, it is assumed that Caroline writes poetry. When there is a lack of pragmatics knowledge, foreign language learners are likely to understand only surface structures and not the intended meaning. Furthermore, presupposition is related to cohesion and coherence which is concerned in the linkage of meanings. For example:

A: *I am going to China next week.*

B: *The Covid-19 virus is spreading.*

There is no cohesion between these statements but there is coherence. Native speakers simplify these utterances that B has his background knowledge and presupposes that A is unable to fly to China due to the corona virus outbreak. They all understand these utterances because English is a turn taking language and the full conversations of these utterances could be expanded to say:

A: *I am going to China next week.*

B: *I don't think you can fly at that time.*

A: *Why not!*

B: *The Covid-19 virus is spreading.*

On the other hand, foreign language learners might not clarify the conversation and might misinterpret the language. In particular, they cannot hear a linkage between utterances. Thus, it is very important to have a knowledge of pragmatics.

In a word, presupposition is essential in language teaching, otherwise foreign language learners may misinterpret meanings due to the lack of the assumptions. In addition, cohesion and coherence should play a crucial role in language teaching because foreign language learners will always listen to those kinds of coherence in their everyday lives such as when talking with foreigners or watching movies.

There are many words and expressions that cannot be interpreted if foreign language learners cannot see a physical context or the circumstances of the utterances of the addressers. It is necessary for language teaching that some sentences are absolutely impossible to understand if we do not know who is speaking, about whom, when, and where. This aspect of pragmatics is called **Deixis**. Deixis includes and relates to people, times, places pronouns, and demonstrative articles. What are Deixis? This Greek root means display and reference. It is one of the major terms of discourse and is a pronominal reference in which a pronoun refers to a noun to serve its function. This form can also perform a vital role within the field of pragmatics and the other two areas of Deixis. One is the temporal sphere of language; it shows expressions within language to describe the time. Examples of these are: *here, there, this, that, now, then, yesterday, later*, and different tenses: present, past and future. The other area of Deixis is called spatial. The spatial works to describe a set of choices from adverbs and prepositions like *across, beneath, up* and *down*. And this second area points out demonstrating pronouns, objects that are close to speaker and objects that are away from speaker as referred to by *This, That, These* and *Those*.

Consider the following sentences.

“They should have to complete their papers by **tomorrow** because they are not here **now**.”

“Call or Line for Home delivery at BIG C.”



If there is no context, these two sentences are completely vague as they contain a large number of deictic expressions. For the first statement there are bits of language that the addressee can only understand in terms of the addresser's intended meanings whilst in the latter, the receiver does not understand the specific time as there is no date given and he would not know whether the sale had already taken place since *Call or Line for Home delivery at BIG C* has a different reference when uttered today rather than a month ago. Such deictic expressions require contextual information or pragmatic information such as the time and the place of the utterances. Foreign language learners can make a referential connection and understand who "they" in the first sentence refers to and when to make a Call or Line for Home delivery at BIG C occurs.

In a nutshell, Deixis is directly related to an utterance to persons, times, and places. It is common in language use so it is very important for foreign language learners to access Deixis in order that they can interpret the intended meanings correctly and completely, especially in an authentic situation.

Native speakers often conceal intended meanings when conversing in everyday situations. This can cause problems for foreign language learners by misinterpreting the meanings produced by native speakers. It is very important for teachers to make foreign language learners aware of non-literal meanings associated with pragmatics such as anomalies, metaphors and idioms.

One well-known sentence that is often used by linguistics to illustrate a clearly semantically anomalous sentence taken from Chomsky's book *Syntactic Structures* is

“Colourless green ideas sleep furiously.”

This sentence seems to obey all the syntactic rules of English but the meanings could not be interpreted. This is a figurative interpretation which English native speakers easily interpret. It means uninteresting, untried ideas often smolder just beneath the surface of expression. Similarly, a sentence which is obviously semantically true may violate a certain convention of maxim (Grice 1975). For example:

“My sister is an only child.”

Foreign language learners might think that she was making a joke or she did not know the meaning of words she was using. It is strange since it represents contradiction; the meaning of sister includes the fact that the individual referred to a female who has at least one sibling. The actual meaning English native speakers make towards this sentence might create an imagery desire. Instead, it makes foreign language learners unclear. (Fromkin et al 1996: 227)

Native speakers can fundamentally understand metaphor for they know their socio-cultural environment and have background knowledge about their country. This is why they indefinitely can create metaphorical use of language; in contrast, foreign language learners cannot interpret a particular idea because they lack pragmatic knowledge. For example:

After a storm comes a calm.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

A poor workman always blames his tools.

(<https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/proverbs.html>)

Those three statements are certainly ambiguous but it can be interpreted easily by English native speakers. Instead, foreign language learners might misinterpret each statement by turning around to see outside if it is going to rain soon or looking at the speaker's face or looking for the workman with his tool. To understand metaphor, they need to understand both literal meanings and figurative meanings since different societies have different metaphors.

A difficult problem for foreign language learners is the meanings of idioms which do not constitute a figurative use of language. They are always similar to ordinary sentences and phrases but they have special semantical characteristics. Hence, it is very important for foreign language learners to access the special restrictions on their use in sentences. For example:

Once in a blue moon.

Hang on.

He kicked the bucket.

Break a leg.



When pigs fly  
 Under the weather  
 Miss the boat.  
 Pulling someone's leg.

English native speakers clearly have understood the meanings of these idioms for they have their pragmatic knowledge whereas foreign language learners might make misinterpretations by determining meaning only from the component parts. Unless they had pragmatic knowledge, they obviously would not understand these idioms because they often use these idioms but in their literal meanings, which are as follows:

It is not very often.  
 Wait.  
 He died.  
 Good luck.  
 It's impossible.  
 I am sick.  
 It's too late.  
 I'm joking.

In all, anomalies, metaphors, and idioms play important roles in language teaching because they are found in everyday use such as in conversation, songs, movies, and poems. Consequently, foreign language learners must realize those conversational implicatures in order to interpret the meanings of the target language correctly. Additionally, Grice (1988-1993) has emphasized his concern more on the work of normal behavior recorded of human beings within their conversation. He introduced the Conversational Implicatures within which the implications to the speaker have been presumed during their conversation. He has proposed four maxims of conversation to reduce the intended meaning as:

1. Quality; whatever the speaker says must be assumed true.
2. Quantity; what the speaker says must be informative, but not too wordy.
3. Relevance; the speaker must be relevant to the purpose of the exchange.
4. Manner; the speaker must be perspicuous and avoid ambiguity.

However, these maxims are said to be the unspoken agreements. It can help one to easily interpret what the speaker wants to say in different situations. Linguists Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber have also concerned these maxims with the idea of relevance to the structure in a conversation that maintains the contribution of relevant process towards matching a context on the assumptions of the addressee.

In conclusion, pragmatics is the study of aspects of language that require reference to the users of the language and are very important for foreign language learners if they are able to interpret the language clearly. With an awareness of pragmatics, learners have access to speech acts which consist of locutionary acts, illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts. Another point is the presupposition; what the addressers assume the addressees of the message already know, whereas Deixis is the relation of an utterance and the listeners have to know the context, otherwise deictic expression are misinterpreted. Lastly, anomalies metaphors and idioms, which are not based on grammatical rules, are very important for foreign language learners as well since they form parts of linguistic meaning. It can be stated that pragmatics is different from semantics as it deals with meaning beyond words, whilst semantics deals with the word and its literal meaning. As a language teacher for EFL, it could also be said that the teaching of pragmatics is vital for EFL learners to understand their target language in their daily lives or certain situations. On the other hand, it is unlikely to succeed in the countries where English is taught as a foreign language such as Thailand, China, and Japan where the majority of those teachers have no pragmatic knowledge and textbooks are their only materials. Above all, the situations given in learning English language are artificial and most teachers are not native speakers. Therefore, language teachers should use multiple techniques to apply their teaching methods such as creating a simulation to encourage learners to speak English in the classroom and providing authentic materials in order to fulfill the knowledge of the target language.

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