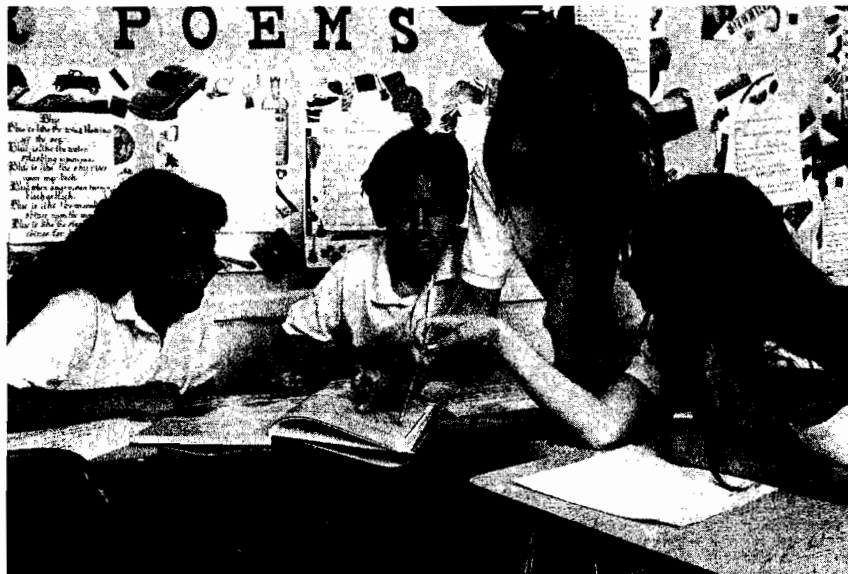


chapter 2

Learning about Language Structure

Students enjoy acquiring new vocabulary in the context of poetry and creative writing.



The first time that I saw you.
I was paralyzed [sic] with emotion
that everything I didn't expected [sic].
I was in love with you
and because of anything
My eyes were telling you beautiful things.
Everything started from the first time
I saw you.
I felt as if I had found
What I was looking for.
I never before had so much happiness in
my life.

I have found in you many reasons to live
maybe because with you I have learn [sic]
what's love.
You have showed me new happiness
having you, I can't ask for more
for all of this.
I love you!

ESL high school student

Language—what it can do for us! It allows us to express deep feelings, as this student has done in her love poem. It takes us beyond the here and now. It connects one individual to another. It communicates the heights of joy and the depths of despair. Language belongs to everyone, from the preschooler to the professor. Almost all aspects of a person's life are touched by language: Everyone speaks and everyone listens. People argue about language, sometimes quite passionately and eloquently. Language is universal, and yet each language has evolved to meet the experiences, needs, and desires of that language's community.

Understanding language structure and use builds teachers' confidence and provides them with essential tools to help their students learn (see figure on page 1). What are these basic understandings about language? One is that all languages share certain features, such as the ability to label objects and to describe actions and events. Another is that language is divided into various subsystems. These include *phonology*, the study of the sound system of a language; *morphology*, the study of how words are built; *syntax*, the study of the structure of sentences; *semantics*, the study of the meanings of a language; and *pragmatics*, the use of language in social contexts.

One of the fascinating facts about language is that speakers learn all these subsystems of their first language without realizing it. Thus, native speakers can converse fluently but may not be able to explain a sound pattern, a grammatical point, or the use of a certain expression to get their needs met. To them, that is "just the way it is." Last, language is accompanied by a powerful nonverbal system.

This chapter explores these various aspects of language and provides examples and suggestions to help English-language-development (ELD) teachers pinpoint student needs and provide appropriate instruction. Such knowledge also helps teachers recognize the richness and variety of students' emerging language.

Language Universals

At last count, 6,809 languages are spoken in today's world (SIL International, 2000). Although not all of these have been intensely studied, linguists have carried out enough investigations over the centuries to posit some universal facts about language (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2003, p. 18).

Language Is Dynamic

Languages change over time. Vocabulary changes are the most obvious: Words disappear, such as *tang* and *swik*. Words expand their meanings, such as *chip* and *mouse*. New words appear, such as *visitability* and *cyberbalkanization*. But languages change in many ways, not just in semantic meaning. Pronunciation (phonology) changes. We recognize that pronunciation in English has altered over time because the spelling of some words is archaic: We no longer pronounce the *k* in *know* or the *w* in *write*; the vowel sounds in *tie*, *sky*, and *high* did not used to rhyme. Even common words such as *tomato* and *park* are pronounced differently depending on which part of the coun-

try the speaker is from, indicating that part of the dynamics of language comes from dialectical differences.

Morphological (word form) changes have occurred in English, such as the gradual elimination of declension endings in nouns and verbs. Only the change in form of the third person (“he goes”) remains in the declension of present-tense verbs, and only the plural shift remains in the inflection of nouns (in the past, nouns in English were inflected in case as well, as in the German). Syntactically, as the inflections dropped off nouns, word order became fixed. Pragmatically, the fusing of the English second person into the single form *you* avoided many of the status distinctions still preserved in European languages. This may have accompanied the loss of other differential behaviors (e.g., bowing, removal of the hat) that occurred with the rise of mercantilism and the decline of feudalism.

Teachers who respect the dynamic nature of language can take delight in learners’ approximations of English rather than be annoyed by constructions that can be considered mistakes. When a student writes, “When school was out he fell in love with a young girl, July” (meaning “Julie”), rather than correcting the misspelling, a teacher can consider that “July” may be a better way to spell the name of a summer love!

Language Is Complex

Without question, using language is one of the most complex of human activities. The wide range of concepts, both concrete and abstract, that language can convey—and the fact that this ability is the norm for human beings rather than the exception—combines with its dynamic quality to provide the human race with a psychological tool unmatched in power and flexibility.

No languages are “primitive.” All languages are equally complex, capable of expressing a wide range of ideas, and expandable to include new words for new concepts.

Language is arbitrary. The relationships between the sounds and the meanings of spoken languages and between gestures and meanings of sign languages are, for the most part, not caused by any natural or necessary reason (such as reflecting a sound, like “buzz” for the sound that bees make when they fly). There is no inherent reason to call an object “table” or “mesa” or “danh t.” Those just happen to be the sounds that English, Spanish, and Vietnamese speakers use. The fact that the meaning–symbol connection is arbitrary gives language an abstracting power removed from direct ties to the here-and-now of objects or events.

Language comes easily to human beings. Every normal child, born anywhere in the world, of any racial, geographical, social, or economic heritage, is capable of learning any language to which he or she is exposed.

Language is open-ended. Speakers of a language are capable of producing and comprehending an infinite set of sentences. As we will see later, these facts help teachers recognize that their learners are proficient language users who can and will produce novel and complex sentences and thoughts in their own and their developing languages.

All Languages Have Structure

All human languages use a finite set of sounds (or gestures) that are combined to form meaningful elements or words, which themselves form an infinite set of possible sentences. Every spoken language also uses discrete sound segments, such as /p/, /n/, or /a/, and has a class of vowels and a class of consonants.

All grammars contain rules for the formation of words and sentences of a similar kind, and similar grammatical categories (for example, noun, verb) are found in all languages. Every language has a way of referring to past time; the ability to negate; and the ability to form questions, issue commands, and so on.

Although human languages are specific to their places of use and origin (for example, languages used by seafaring cultures have more specific words for oceanic phenomena than do languages used by desert tribes), semantic universals, such as “male” or “female,” are found in every language in the world.

Teachers who are familiar with the structure of language can use this knowledge to design learning activities that build the language of English learners in a systematic way. Linguistic knowledge—not only about English but also about the possibilities inherent in languages that differ from English—helps teachers to view the language world of the English learner with insight and empathy.

Phonology: The Sound Patterns of Language

Phonology is the study of the system or pattern of speech sounds. Native speakers know intuitively the patterns of their mother tongue and when given a list of nonsense words can recognize which are possible pronunciations and which are not possible to pronounce in their language.

Example of Concept: Is It English?



These activities illustrate the characteristics of the English sound system:

- ❖ Which of the following are *possible* English words and which would be *impossible* because they do not fit the English sound system?
dschang, borogrove, jëfandikoo, nde, takkies
- ❖ Product names often use existing morphemes combined in ways to create a new word that fits within the English sound system and evokes a positive image for the product. For example, “Aleve” connotes “alleviate,” as in making a headache better. ■

Phonemes

Phonemes are the sounds that make up a language. They are the distinctive units that “make a difference” when sounds form words. For example, in English the initial consonant sounds /t/ and /d/ are the only difference between the words *tip* and *dip* and are thus phonemes. The number of phonemes in a language ranges between twenty and fifty; English has a high average count, from thirty-four to forty-five, depending on the dialect.



ADAPTED INSTRUCTION: English Sounds Not Found in Other Languages

Certain phonemes in English do not exist in other languages.

Chinese: /b/ /ch/ /d/ /dg/ /g/ /oa/ /sh/ /s/ /th/ /v/ /z/

Japanese: /dg/ /f/ /i/ /th/ /oo/ /v/ /schwa/

Spanish: /dg/ /j/ /sh/ /th/ /z/

English learners might experience difficulty in hearing and producing these sounds. Using words with these sounds in context helps learners begin to distinguish them.

Each language has permissible ways in which phonemes can be combined. These are called *phonemic sequences*. In English, /spr/ as in *spring*, /nd/ as in *handle*, and /kt/ as in *talked* are phonemic sequences. Languages also have permissible places for these sequences: initial (at the beginning of a word), medial (between initial and final position), and final (at the end of a word), or in a combination of these positions. English, for example, uses /sp/ in all three positions—*spea*k, *respe*ct, *grasp*—but uses /sk/ in only two—*sch*ool, *descri*be. Spanish, on the other hand, uses the sequence /sp/ medially—*espa*ñol—but never initially. This would explain why, in speaking English, native-Spanish speakers may say “espeak.” Not all of the permissible sequences are used in every pattern. For example, English has /cr/ and /br/ as initial consonant clusters. *Craft* is a word but—at present—*bra*ft is not, although it would be phonologically permissible. *Nk*aft, on the other hand, is not permissible because /nk/ is not an initial cluster in English.

Phonemes can be described in terms of their characteristic point of articulation (tip, front, or back of the tongue), the manner of articulation (the way the airstream is obstructed), and whether the vocal cords vibrate or not (voiced and voiceless sounds). Table 2.1 shows the English stops (sounds that are produced by completely blocking the breath stream and then releasing it abruptly). The point placements given in the chart relate to the positions in the mouth from which the sound is produced. Other languages may have different points. The point for /t/ and /d/ in Spanish, for example, is labiodental, with the tongue just behind the upper teeth. Not all languages distinguish between voiced and voiceless sounds. Arabic speakers may say “barking lot” instead of “parking lot” because to them /p/ and /b/ are not distinguishable.

Table 2.1

Point of Articulation for Voiced and Voiceless English Stops

Point	Labial		Dental			
	Bilabial	Labiodental	Interdental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar
Voiceless	p			t		k
Voiced	b			d		g

Example of Concept: Pronunciation

While studying "Our Community," Mrs. Cota has the students brainstorm names of neighborhood and main streets. Students then randomly choose the names they will enter on their blank bingo cards. Various student "callers" pull the street names from a container to read off to their classmates. Correct pronunciation is important to discriminate between often-similar names (Orchard versus Orchid Streets), and the rest of the class practices auditory discrimination. ■

Pitch

Besides the actual formation of sounds, other sound qualities are important in speech. Pitch, the vibration of the vocal chords, is important in distinguishing meaning within a sentence: "Eva is going," as a statement, is said with a falling pitch, but when it is used as a question, the pitch rises at the end. This use of pitch to modify the sentence meaning is called *intonation*. Languages that use the pitch of individual syllables to contrast meanings are called *tone languages*. Pitch, whether at the word level or at the sentence level, is one of the phonological components of a language that plays an important role in determining meaning.

Stress

Stress, the increase in vocal activity, also modifies the meaning of words. It can occur at the word or the sentence level. Within words, specific syllables can be stressed. In the following examples, the stressed syllable is indicated by the accent mark ':

<i>pérfect</i>	adjective, as in "She handed in a perfect paper."
<i>perféct</i>	verb, as in "It takes so long to perfect a nativelike accent."
<i>rébel</i>	noun, as in "James Dean played the role of a rebel."
<i>rebél</i>	verb, as in "Adolescents often rebel against restrictions."

Stress can further be used at the sentence level to vary emphasis. For example, the following sentences all carry different emphases:

Shé did that.
She díd that.
She did thát.

When words are combined into phrases and sentences, one of the syllables receives greater stress than the others. Students who learn a second language sometimes find difficulty in altering the sound of a word in the context of whole sentences. Thus, teachers are better served by teaching words in context rather than in lists. Having students practice *shoes* and *choose* in isolation does not guarantee that they will correctly emphasize *white shoes* and *why choose* in context.

Correct pronunciation is one of the most difficult features of learning a second language. Teachers who overemphasize correct pronunciation when learners are in

the early stages of learning English may hinder the innovative spirit of risk-taking that is preferable when a learner is trying to achieve fluency. Instead, teaching intonation through fun activities such as chants and songs brings enjoyment to language learning. Later, if an older learner has serious accent issues, computer software such as Pronunciation Plus can provide individualized tutoring.

Example of Concept: Pronunciation, Intonation, and Stress

Primary-grade teachers use chants, rhymes, and songs as a natural part of their teaching. In the higher grades, many teachers have successfully helped students work on pronunciation, intonation, and stress by having them write their own songs based on the current topic of study. For example, when studying geometry, one group of students wrote the following to the tune "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star": "We are studying area / Perimeter and polygons. / Area is what's inside / Polygons have many shapes / All around so you can't escape / We are studying area / Perimeter and polygons." ■

Native speakers are seldom if ever taught explicitly the phonological rules of their language, yet they know them. Phonological knowledge is acquired as a learner listens to and begins to produce speech. The same is true in a second language. A learner routinely exposed to a specific dialect or accent in English views it as the target language.

Morphology: The Words of Language

Morphology is the study of the meaning units in a language. Many people believe that individual words constitute these basic meaning units. However, many words can be broken down into smaller segments—morphemes—that still retain meaning.

Morphemes

Morphemes, small, indivisible units, are the basic building blocks of meaning. *Abolitionists* is an English word composed of four morphemes: *aboli* + *tion* + *ist* + *s* (root + noun-forming suffix + noun-forming suffix + plural marker). Morphemes can be represented by a single sound, such as /a/ (as a morpheme, this means "without" as in *amoral* or *asexual*); a syllable, such as the noun-forming suffix *-ment* in *amendment*; or two or more syllables, such as in *tiger* or *artichoke*. Two different morphemes may have the same sound, such as the /er/ as in *dancer* ("one who dances") and the /er/ in *fancier* (the comparative form of *fancy*). A morpheme may also have alternate phonetic forms: The regular plural *-s* can be pronounced either /z/ (*bags*), /s/ (*cats*), or /ɪz/ (*bushes*).

Morphemes are of different types and serve different purposes. *Free morphemes* can stand alone (*envelop*, *the*, *through*), whereas *bound morphemes* occur only in conjunction with others (*-ing*, *dis-*, *-ceive*). Most bound morphemes occur as *affixes*. (The

others are bound roots.) Affixes at the beginning of words are *prefixes* (*un-* in the word *unafraid*); those added at the end are *suffixes* (*-able* in the word *believable*); and *infixes* are morphemes that are inserted into other morphemes (*-zu-* in the German word *anzufangen*, “to begin”).

Bound morphemes are of two types: derivational and inflectional. *Derivational morphemes* can change the meaning of a word. For example, adding *ex-* to the noun *champion* means “former champion.” Derivational morphemes can also change a word’s part of speech. By adding *-ance* to the adjective *clear*, the noun *clearance* is formed. On the other hand, *inflectional morphemes* (of which English has only eight), only qualify the word in some manner. An *-s* is added to a verb to indicate third-person singular or an *-ed* to indicate past action; an *-s* is added to a noun to indicate more than one or an *-’s* to indicate possession; *-er* and *-est* are added to adjectives to indicate comparison or superlative.

Part of the power and flexibility of English is the ease with which families of words can be understood by knowing the rules for forming nouns from verbs and so forth—for example, knowing that the suffix *-ism* means “a doctrine, system, or philosophy” and *-ist* means “one who follows a doctrine, system, or philosophy.” This predictability can make it easier for students to learn to infer words from context rather than to rely on rote memorization.

Example of Concept: Working with Morphemes



At the beginning of the science unit, Mrs. Pierdant selected several roots from a general list (*astro*, *bio*, *geo*, *hydr*, *luna*, *photo*, *phys*, *terr*) along with a representative word. She then had students look for and make a list of words with those roots from various chapters in the science text. Next she gave the students a list of prefixes and affixes and asked each team to generate five to ten new words with their definitions. Students played various guess-the-meaning games with the new words. Interest in science increased after these activities. ■

Word-Formation Processes

English has historically been a language that has welcomed new words—either borrowing them from other languages or coining new ones from existing words. Studying processes of word formation heightens students’ interest in vocabulary building.



ADAPTED INSTRUCTION: Borrowed Words

Making charts of English words that English learners use in their first language and words English has borrowed from the students’ native languages increases everyone’s vocabulary and often generates interesting discussions about food, clothing, cultural artifacts, and the ever-expanding world of technology.

Clipping. Clipping is a process of shortening words, such as *prof* for *professor* or the slangy *teach* for *teacher*. Learning two words for one gives students a sense that they are mastering both colloquial and academic speech.

Acronyms. In English, *acronyms* are plentiful, and many are already familiar to students—UN, CIA, and NASA, for example. A growing list of acronyms helps students increase their vocabulary of both the words forming the acronyms and the acronyms themselves. Who can resist knowing that *scuba* is a *self-contained underwater breathing apparatus*?

Blends. Words formed from parts of two words are called blends—for example, *smog* from *smoke* + *fog*, and *brunch* from *breakfast* + *lunch*. Students can become word detectives and discover new blends through shopping (Wal-Mart?) or advertisements.

Students can add to their enjoyment of learning English by finding new words and creating their own. Those who play video games can make up new names for characters using morphemes that evoke pieces of meaning. Advertising copywriters and magazine writers do this on a daily basis; the word *blog* is a combination of the free morphemes *web* and *log*, and the prefixes *e-* and *i-* have combined to form many new words and concepts over recent decades (e.g., *e-commerce* and *iTunes*). The study of morphology adds fun to learning English as well as word power.

Syntax: The Sentence Patterns of Language

Syntax refers to the structure of sentences and the rules that govern the formation of a sentence. Sentences are composed of words that follow patterns, but sentence meaning is more than the sum of the meaning of the words. Sentence A, “The teacher asked the students to sit down,” has the same words as sentence B, “The students asked the teacher to sit down,” but not the same meaning. Not every sequence of words is a sentence (C): “*Asked the the teacher to down students sit”¹ follows no syntactic rules and thus has no meaning.

All native speakers of a language can distinguish syntactically correct from syntactically incorrect combinations of words. Even very young English-speaking children know that sentences A and B above are meaningful, but sentence C is not. This syntactic knowledge in the native language is not taught in school but is constructed as native speakers acquire their language as children. This internal knowledge allows speakers to recognize the sentence “’Twas brillig and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabes” in Lewis Carroll’s poem “Jabberwocky” as syntactically correct English, even though the words are nonsense.

¹In linguistic notation, an asterisk (*) is used before a word or string of items to indicate it is not a possible combination in the language cited.

Fortunately, speakers of a language with this knowledge of correct and incorrect sentences can, in fact, understand sentences that are not perfectly formed. Sentences that contain minor syntactic errors, such as the high-school student's poem cited at the beginning of this chapter, are still comprehensible.



ADAPTED INSTRUCTION: English Syntax and Chinese Speakers

English learners with Chinese as a mother tongue may need additional teacher assistance with the following aspects of English:

- Verb tense: *I see him yesterday.* (In Chinese, the adverb signals the tense, not the verb, and the verb form is not changed to mark tense; so in English changing the verb form may prove to be difficult for the learner.)
- Subject/verb agreement: *He see me.* (In Chinese, verbs do not change form to create subject-verb agreement.)
- Word order: *I at home ate.* (In Chinese, prepositional phrases come before the verb—the rules governing the flexibility in adverb-phrase placement in English are difficult for many learners.)
- Plurals: *They give me 3 dollar.* (In Chinese, like English, the marker indicates number, but in English the noun form changes as well.)

Besides grammaticality and word order, speakers' syntactic knowledge helps them understand three other sentence features. Double meaning, or *ambiguity*, occurs in sentences such as "She is a Chinese art expert" or the frequently seen "Please wait for the hostess to be seated." On the other hand, some sentences of *different structures mean the same thing*: "She is easy to please"; "Pleasing her is easy"; "It is easy to please her." Finally, speakers can understand and produce novel utterances, the *creative* aspect of language.

Whereas syntax refers to the internally constructed rules that make sentences, *grammar* looks at whether a sentence conforms to a standard. An important distinction, therefore, is the one between standard and colloquial usage. Many colloquial usages are acceptable sentence patterns in English, even though their usage is not standard—for example, "I ain't got no pencil" is acceptable English syntax. It is not, however, standard usage. Through example and in lessons, teachers who are promoting the standard dialect need to be aware that students' developing competence will not always conform to that standard and that students will also learn colloquial expressions they will not always use in the appropriate context (see the Appropriate Language section in this chapter).

Example of Concept: Colloquial versus Standard Usage



As Mrs. Ralfe hears students using new colloquial phrases, she has them write them on the left half of a poster hanging in the room. At the end of the day, she and the students discuss the phrases and how to say them in a more standard fashion. The students then write the standard phrase on the right side of the poster. ■

Semantics: The Meanings of Language

Semantics is the study of meanings of individual words and of larger units such as phrases and sentences. Speakers of a language have learned the “agreed-upon” meanings of words and phrases in their language and are not free to change meanings of words at will, which would result in no communication at all (Fromkin et al., 2003).

Some words carry a high degree of stability and conformity in the ways they are used (*kick* as a verb, for example, must involve the foot—“He kicked me with his hand” is not semantically correct). Other words carry multiple meanings (e.g., *break*), ambiguous meanings (*bank*, as in “They’re at the bank”), or debatable meanings (*marriage*, for example, for many people can refer only to heterosexual alliances, and to use it for nonheterosexual contexts is not only unacceptable but inflammatory). For second-language acquisition, the process of translating already-recognized meaning from one language to the next is only part of the challenge.

Another challenge is that the English language is extraordinarily rich in synonyms. One estimate of English vocabulary places the number at over three million words. Fortunately, only about 200,000 words are in common use, and an educated person uses about 2,000 in a week (Wilton, 2003). The challenge when learning this vast vocabulary is to distinguish denotations, connotations, and other shades of meaning.



ADAPTED INSTRUCTION: Denotations and Connotations

- 1 With students, generate a list of eight to ten thematically linked words, such as colors.
- 2 Have students define each word using objects, drawings, or basic definitions (denotation).
- 3 Elicit or provide connotative (the implied, emotional) meanings of the words, for example: *red* = irritated or angry.
- 4 During their independent reading, have students be alert to the connotative use of the words. Add representative sentences to the chart.

In addition, speakers of a language must make semantic shifts when writing. It may be understandable when a speaker uses the colloquial “And then she goes . . .” to mean “she says,” but in written English, one must make a semantic shift toward formality, using synonyms such as “she declared,” “she remarked,” and “she admitted.” A teacher who encourages this type of semantic expansion helps students acquire semantic flexibility.

Example of Concept: Learning Synonyms



Each week, Mrs. Arias selects five to eight groups of synonyms from a list (Kress, 1993). During time spent at a language center, pairs of students choose two groups to study. They look up the words and write definitions, write a story incorporating the words (five) in each group, or develop games and quizzes for their classmates to play. At the end of the week, students report on their learning. ■

So what does it mean to “know” a word? The meaning of words comes partially from the stored meaning and partially from the meaning derived from context. In the previous “They’re at the bank” example, the meaning would be obvious if “river” were added before “bank.” In addition, knowing a word includes the ability to pronounce the word correctly, to use the word grammatically in a sentence, and to know which morphemes are appropriately connected with the word. This knowledge is acquired as the brain absorbs and interacts with the meaning in context. For English learners, acquiring new vocabulary in semantically related groups helps them make connections and retain important concepts.



ADAPTED INSTRUCTION: Vocabulary Teaching and Concept Development

The following graphic organizers help students not only with vocabulary but also with how concepts relate to one another:

- *Concept maps.* The concept is in the center, and definitions, examples, and details are linked around it.
- *Key word or topic notes.* The key word is in the left column with notes in the right.
- *Thinking tree.* The topic is at the top of the “tree” and the main ideas are branches coming down. From the main ideas twigs are added as details.
- *Word hierarchy.* For each concept, the next level up and down is supplied. For example, *corn*—the next level up is *vegetable*, and the next level down could be *grits* or *cornstarch*.

Pragmatics: The Influence of Context

Pragmatics is the study of communication in context. It includes three major communication skills. The first is the ability to use language for different functions—greeting, informing, demanding, promising, requesting, and so on. The second is the ability to appropriately adapt or change language according to the listener or situation—talking differently to a friend than to a principal, or talking differently in a classroom than on a playground. The third ability is to follow rules for conversations and narrative—knowing how to tell a story, give a book report, or recount events of the day. Linguists who study pragmatics examine the ways that people take turns in conversation, introduce topics of conversation and stay on topic, and rephrase their words when they are misunderstood, as well as how people use nonverbal signals in conversation: body language, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and distance between speaker and listener. Because these pragmatic ways of using speech vary depending on language and culture (Maciejewski, 2003), teachers who understand these differences can help learners to adjust their pragmatics to those that “work” when speaking English.

Language Functions

In Halliday’s (1978) seminal work in observing his young son, he distinguished seven different functions for language: *instrumental* (getting needs met); *regulatory* (con-

trolling others' behavior); *informative* (communicating information); *interactional* (establishing social relationships); *personal* (expressing individuality); *heuristic* (investigating and acquiring knowledge); and *imaginative* (expressing fantasy). Providing English learners with opportunities to engage in the various functions is critical for them to develop a full pragmatic range in English.



ADAPTED INSTRUCTION: Promoting Language Functions

- ✎ *Instrumental*: Analyze advertising and propaganda so that students learn how people use language to get what they want.
- ✎ *Regulatory*: Allow students to be in charge of small and large groups.
- ✎ *Informative*: Have students keep records of events over periods of time, review their records, and draw conclusions; for example, keeping records of classroom pets, weather patterns, or building constructions.
- ✎ *Interactional*: Have students work together to plan field trips, social events, and classroom and school projects.
- ✎ *Personal*: Use personal language to give permission to students to share personal thoughts and opinions.
- ✎ *Heuristic*: In projects, ask questions that no one, including the teacher, knows the answer to.
- ✎ *Imaginative*: Encourage "play" with language—the sounds of words and the images they convey.

Source: Adapted from Pinnell (1985).

Appropriate Language

To speak appropriately, the speaker must take into account the gender, status, age, and cultural background of the listener. The term *speech register* is often used to denote the varieties of language that take these factors into consideration. For example, in the classroom in which the teacher's assistant is an older woman who shares the language and culture of the children, students may converse with her in a manner similar to the interactions with their own mothers, whereas their discourse with the teacher could reflect usage reserved for more formal situations. A reverse of these registers would be inappropriate.

Example of Concept: Learning to Be Appropriate



In preparation for a drama unit, Mrs. Morley has her students develop short conversations that might occur with different people in different situations, such as selling ice cream to a child, a teenager, a working adult, and a retiree. Pairs of students perform their conversations and the class critiques the appropriateness of the language. Students develop a feel for appropriate expressions, tones, and stances before working on plays and skits. ■

Conversational Rules

Numerous aspects of conversation carry unexamined rules. Conversations generally follow a script. There are procedures for turn taking, for introducing and maintaining topics, and for clarifying misunderstandings.

Scripts. Every situation carries with it the expectations of the speakers involved and a script that carries out those expectations. (Note: When linguists use the term *script*, they mean a predictable sequence of events, not a written dialogue that actors follow.) In a restaurant, for example, the customers pause at the front counter to see if someone will escort them to their seat. They anticipate being asked, “How many (people in the party)?” To continue the script, when they are seated, they expect to be approached by a waitperson, given a menu, and asked if they would like a drink before ordering. This interchange follows a predictable sequence, and pragmatic knowledge is needed to carry out the parts of the dialogue. Other contexts, such as fast-food restaurants, have different scripts.

Classroom procedures also have scripts, and one of the important tasks of kindergarten and first-grade teachers is to teach children how to initiate and respond appropriately in the school setting. Confusion and possibly a sense of alienation can arise for English learners who are used to the school scripts in their own countries and find a different one in U.S. schools. A knowledgeable teacher recognizes that these students are acting from the school scripts with which they are familiar. It may take time—and explicit coaching—for students to learn the set of behaviors appropriate for a U.S. school context.

Turn Taking. Speakers of a language have implicitly internalized the rules of when to speak, when to remain silent, how long to speak, how long to remain silent, how to give up “the floor,” how to enter into a conversation, and so on. Linguistic devices such as intonation, pausing, and phrasing are used to signal an exchange of turns. Some groups of people wait for a clear pause before beginning their turn to speak, whereas others start while the speaker is winding down (Tannen, n.d.). It is often this difference in when to take the floor that causes feelings of unease and sometimes hostility. A speaker may constantly feel that he is being interrupted or pushed in a conversation or, conversely, that he has to keep talking because his partner does not join in when appropriate.

Topic Focus and Relevance. These elements involve the ability of conversationalists to explore and maintain one another’s interest in topics that are introduced, the context of the conversation, the genre of the interchange (storytelling, excuse making), and the relationship between the speakers.



ADAPTED INSTRUCTION: Maintaining a Topic

- When conversing with an English learner, add related information to the student’s topic. The student learns to sustain a conversation over several turns as well as developing additional vocabulary.
- Provide visual prompts such as pictures, objects, or a story outline to help students tell a story in sequence.

Conversational Repair. This involves techniques for clearing up misunderstanding and maintaining the conversation. For example, a listener confused by the speaker's use of the pronoun *she* might ask, "Do you mean Sally's aunt or her cousin?" With English learners, the alert teacher will notice quizzical looks rather than specific conversational interactions that signal lack of understanding.

Nonverbal Communication

A complex nonverbal system accompanies, complements, or takes the place of the verbal. "An elaborate and secret code that is written nowhere, known by none, and understood by all" is Edward Sapir's definition of nonverbal behavior (quoted in Miller [1985]). This nonverbal system, estimated to account for up to 93 percent of communication (Mehrabian, 1969), involves sending and receiving messages through gesture, facial expression, eye contact, posture, and tone of voice.

Everyone is adept at sending and receiving these nonverbal messages, but, as in oral language, the meaning people get from them is unconsciously learned. Because this nonverbal system accounts for a large part of the emotional message given and received, awareness of its various aspects helps teachers to recognize when students' nonverbal messages may or may not fit with expected school norms.

Body Language

Body language, the way one holds and positions oneself, is one way teachers communicate their authority in the classroom. Standing in front of the room, they become the focus of attention; standing arms akimbo communicates impatience with students' disorder; passing from desk to desk as students are working communicates individual attention to students' needs. In turn, students' body language communicates that they are paying attention (eyes up front and hands folded is the standard way teachers expect attentive students to act). Students who look industrious are often seen as more effective academically, and a student who approaches obsequiously to ask permission to leave the classroom will often receive the permission that was denied a more abrasive interrupter.

In a parent conference, for example, cultural differences in body language may impede communication. Parents may need to be formally ushered into the classroom and not merely waved in with a flick of the hand. Parents from a culture that offers elaborate respect for the teacher may become uncomfortable if the teacher slouches, moves his or her chair too intimately toward the parent, or otherwise compromises the formal nature of the interchange.

Gestures

Gestures—expressive motions or actions made with hands, arms, head, or even the whole body—are culturally based signs that are often misunderstood. Gestures are commonly used to convey "come here," "good-bye," "yes," "no," and "I don't know." In European-American culture, for example, "come here" is signaled by holding the hand vertically, palm facing the body, and moving the index finger rapidly back and forth. In other cultures, it is signaled by holding the hand in a more horizontal position, palm

facing down, and moving the fingers rapidly back and forth. "Yes" is generally signaled by a nod of the head, but in some places a shake of the head means "yes." This can be particularly unnerving for teachers if they constantly interpret the students' head shakes as rejection rather than affirmation.



ADAPTED INSTRUCTION: Understanding Gestures

Teachers examine gestures they frequently use or expect in their classroom.

- Students discuss what gestures they use and what the teacher's gestures mean to them.

Facial Expressions

Through the use of eyebrows, eyes, cheeks, nose, lips, tongue, and chin, people non-verbally signal any number of emotions, opinions, and moods. Although some facial expressions of happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, disgust, and interest appear to be universal across cultures (Ekman & Friesen, 1971), other expressions are learned. Smiles and winks, tongue thrusts, and chin jutting can have different meanings depending on the context within a culture as well as across cultures. Americans, for example, are often perceived by others as being superficial because of the amount of smiling they do, even to strangers. In some cultures, smiles are reserved for close friends and family.



ADAPTED INSTRUCTION: Learning about Facial Expressions

- Have students make lists of expressions that are neutral, pleasing, or offensive.
- Discover and discuss how English learners' findings may differ from those of the native-English speakers.

Eye Contact

Eye contact is another communication device that is highly variable and frequently misunderstood. Both insufficient and excessive eye contact create feelings of unease, yet it is so subject to individual variation that there are no hard-and-fast rules to describe it. Generally, children in European-American culture are taught not to stare but are expected to look people in the eye when addressing them. In some cultures, however, children learn that the correct way to listen is to avoid direct eye contact with the speaker. In the following dialogue, the teacher incorrectly interprets Sylvia's downcast eyes as an admission of guilt because, in the teacher's culture, eye avoidance signals culpability.

Teacher: Sylvia and Amanda, I want to hear what happened on the playground.

Amanda: (looks at teacher) Sylvia hit me with the jump rope.

Teacher: (turning to Sylvia) Sylvia, did you hit her?

Sylvia: (looking at her feet) No.

Teacher: Look at me, Sylvia. Am I going to have to take the jump rope away?

Sylvia: (continuing to look down) No.

By being aware that eye contact norms vary, teachers can begin to move beyond feelings of mistrust and open up lines of communication. If a student's culture mandates that a young person not look an adult in the eye when directly addressed, the teacher may need to explain to the student that in English the rules of address call for different behavior.

Communicative Distance

People maintain distance between themselves and others, an invisible wall or "bubble" that defines a person's personal space. This distance varies according to relationships. Generally, people stand closest to relatives, close to friends, and farthest from strangers. This distinction is commonly found across cultures, although differences occur in the size of the bubble. South Americans stand closer to one another than do North Americans, who in turn stand closer than do Scandinavians. Violating a person's space norm can be interpreted as aggressive behavior. In the United States, an accidental bumping of another person requires an "excuse me" or "pardon me." In Arab countries, such inadvertent contact does not violate the individual's space and requires no verbal apology.



ADAPTED INSTRUCTION: Learning about Communicative Distance

- *Interviews.* Students interview others and ask questions such as "What distance is too close for a friend? For a family member?" "At what distance do you stand to an adult, a teacher, or a clerk?"
- *Observations.* Students observe people, videos, pictures, and television and compare these people's distance behavior in relation to the situation, culture, sex of participants, and so forth.
- *Role-play.* Students experience what a person feels when someone stands too far from or too close to them.

Source: Adapted from Arias (1996).

Conceptions of Time

In the mainstream culture of the United States, individuals' understanding of time may be at odds with that of students of other cultures. Hall (1959) pointed out that, for speakers of English, time is an object rather than an objective experience. Time is handled as if it were a material. English expressions include "saving time," "spending time," and "wasting time." Time is considered to be a commodity, and those who misuse this commodity earn disapproval. Teachers reprove students for idling and admonish students to "get busy." Standardized tests record higher scores for students

who work quickly. In fact, teachers correlate rapid learning with intelligence. Teachers allocate time differently to students in classroom recitation, giving more time for answers to students from whom they expect more understanding of students and their families whose time values differ from their own, and are willing to make allowances for such differences. In oral discourse, some students may need more time to express themselves, not because of language shortcomings per se, but because the timing of oral discourse is slower in their culture.

Example of Concept: Time and Culture

Parents who were raised in cultures with radically different concepts of time may not be punctual to the minute for parent conferences. One group of teachers allowed for this by not scheduling specific individual conference times. Instead, they designated blocks of three hours when they would be available for conferences, and parents arrived when they could. ■

Language allows speakers a means for rich and dynamic expression. By knowing about language and its various properties and components, teachers are in a position to promote English-language development while welcoming students' primary languages as an alternative vehicle for self-expression. Languages have universal features; so, regardless of the language of the student, teachers are assured that by having successfully acquired one language, students will also be successful in a second (or third or fourth). Languages are composed of numerous subsystems. With knowledge about these various subsystems, teachers can recognize the effort involved in developing English ability, pinpoint areas for growth, and adapt instruction to incorporate students' language needs into the daily program. Language is accompanied by a nonverbal system that can sometimes cause more misunderstanding than does a lack of grammatical competence. Armed with knowledge about the nonverbal, teachers add to their own as well as their students' ability to discuss and overcome differences. Understanding the basics of language helps to make language learning a meaningful, purposeful, and shared endeavor.

LEARNING MORE

Further Reading

For a very readable article on language change directed toward teachers, see Gadda's chapter "Language Change in the History of English: Implications for Teachers" in D. Durkin, *Language Issues: Readings for Teachers* (1995). He makes the point that teachers need to understand language change to counteract the "unfortunate popular attitude that sees all change in language as decay" (p. 263).

Web Search

To learn more about the subsystems of language, Dr. R. Beard provides short, amusing, enlightening essays.

- How to Pronounce “Ghoti” . . . and Why (www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/rbeard/phono.html)
- There Are No Such Things as Words (www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/rbeard/words.html)
- You Have to Pay Your Syntax (www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/rbeard/syntax.html)
- Can Colorless Green Ideas Sleep Furiously? (www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/rbeard/semantic.html)

Exploration

Go through the checkout line at a grocery store. Pay attention to the verbal and nonverbal elements of the checkout procedure. Record as much as possible of the procedure. Repeat this procedure, observe others going through the same procedure, or engage in the exploration with several colleagues. Look for patterns. What signals the beginning? What words are exchanged? What topics of conversation are permissible? How does the interaction terminate? Once you’ve discovered the script for the checkout, begin to pay attention to the scripts in your classroom.

Experiment

Engage students in an activity to determine personal comfort in distance. Have students stand in two opposing lines. At a signal, have one line move one step toward the other. Repeat, alternating the line that moves until a student says, “Stop.” Mark that distance. Continue until all students have said “Stop.” Discuss the implications of the various distances. The activity can also be done sitting.

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