

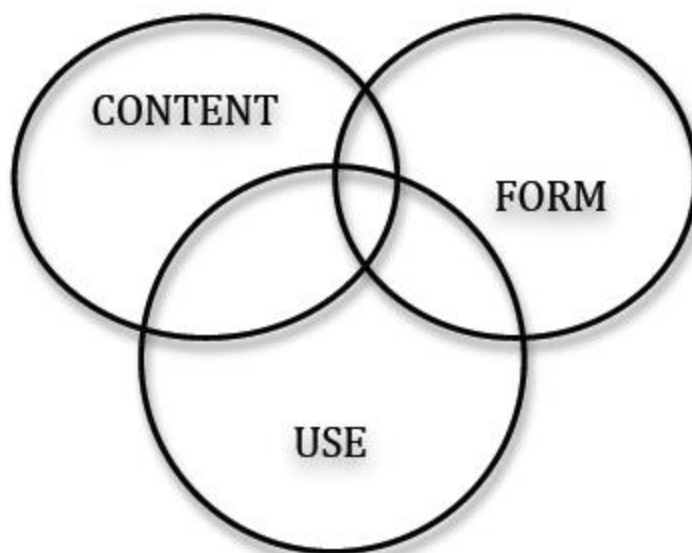


PRAGMATICS - LANGUAGE AND HOW WE USE IT

WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

Language is a rule-based system for making meaning in either spoken, written or a gestural (signed) form. Because language is such an inherent and largely unconscious part of our thinking and interaction we can often underestimate its importance to us in life, in learning and in the development of literacy.

Lois Bloom and Margaret Lahey (1978), were the first to describe three separate but connected language skills which must be integrated in a dynamic way if we are to be able to understand and use language effectively. In the diagram below these are shown as three intersecting circles, which partially overlap and influence each other.



The **CONTENT** of language involves the ideas, concepts and words we use to express ourselves. Without this CONTENT area of language, shared meaning cannot be jointly constructed by the participants. This language area is often referred to as "semantics". Vocabulary plays a crucial role, encompassing not only nouns and verbs, but flexible networks of word meanings and associations. Consider the way some powerful small words such as prepositions and conjunctions can influence the meaning in the following pairs of sentences...

I caught the bus to town because I was late.
I caught the bus to town so I was late.
Sally ran up to her friend.
Sally ran into her friend.

We have written previously about the importance of teaching children new words – focusing on how you say a word, how it sounds different from other words, what it means, and how you use it in a sentence in particular situations. We stress the importance of encouraging children to make connections between different words and appreciate that words often have more than one meaning. (See Articles No. 12 and No. 17).

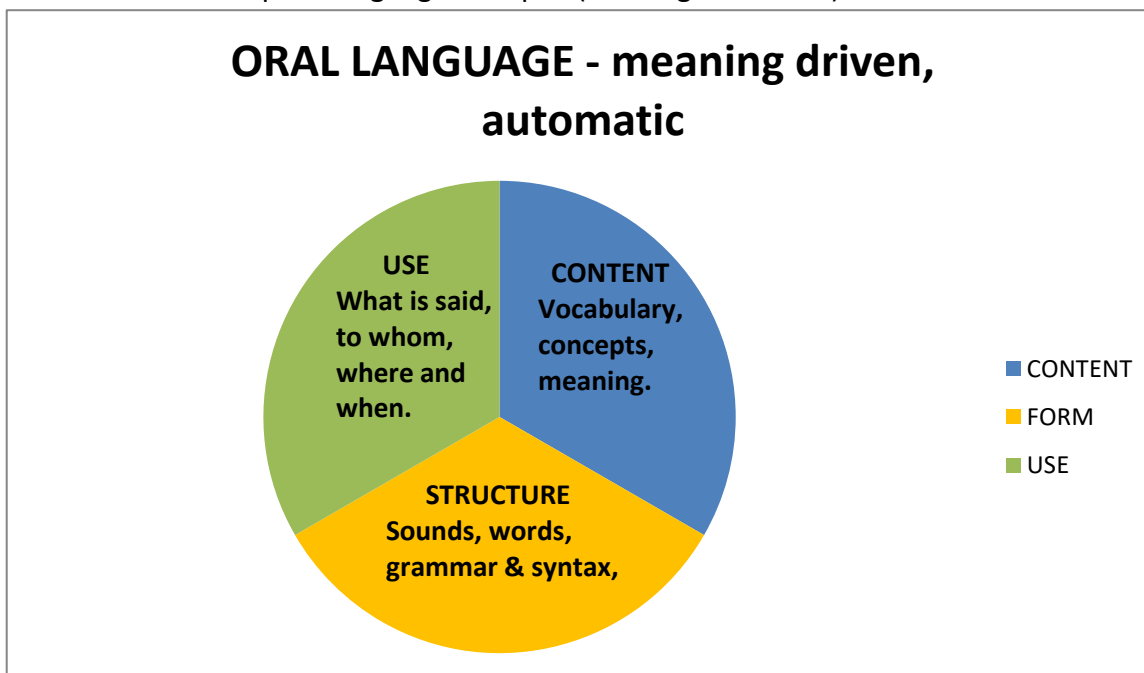
Just as a cake requires a recipe or formula, the words of language also need **FORM** (or **STRUCTURE**), if they are to lead to communication. The structure of any language, and in this particular case, English, is governed by agreed rules. These include the way the individual sounds of that language are formed and combined into words, the markers of grammar which change word and sentence meanings (for example, plurals, past tense, agreement between subject and verb) and the combinations of words to form sentences (syntax). The ways we combine ideas and connect consecutive sentences are aspects of structure that goes beyond the boundary of the sentence and this is sometimes referred to as cohesion. For example, in a story a character may initially be called by the name “Pirate Pete” but later in the narrative is referred to as “that swashbuckling rogue” or just by the pronoun references “he” or “him”.

The third area described by Bloom and Lahey is **USE**. This includes two elements - the reasons why we talk (the functions of language) and also how we consider, react to others and adjust our language in the dialogue (context).

This area labelled as “USE” is the focus for the remainder of this article.

LANGUAGE AS A PIE

Extending the explanation described above, we have found it useful when talking with teachers to introduce the concept of language as a ‘pie’ (see diagram below).



The artificial segments of content, structure and use, are still there but they are contained within the 'whole' pie, reinforcing the notion that Language is primary, fulfilling a basic need and driven by meaning (hunger). The pie analogy also highlights those seemingly "hidden mixed ingredients" of language. Every person has an individual language pie created using the same basic recipe. Yet no two pies taste the same. We each have similar but different 'language pies' – mixed and cooked in different ways and to a greater or lesser extent!

The important thing for us to remember is that as children progress through the school years they will need to understand more complex ideas and use language in new and more demanding ways. The basic language pie is not sufficient for classroom success. We as educators will need to nourish and "feed into" our student's language pie, so that they continue to develop in all aspects of communication.

WHY DO WE USE LANGUAGE?

There are a limitless number of uses for language.

Some common functions include: telling a story; asking questions; comforting a friend; criticizing someone's actions; giving instructions about how to play a game; persuading another to follow your view; or passing on information.

Genres are types of oral or written language texts, which serve a specific purpose or function in our communities. They are of particular importance in the classroom and in achieving academic success. Effective language users recognize these genres because of the way they are organized and the type of language features the speaker or writer has used. For example, when we give instructions for making a kite, the communication process is significantly helped by stating our intended goal or purpose, itemizing the necessary materials or equipment and then giving clear and explicit instructions in the correct time sequence. The choice of vocabulary and language markers will most likely include specific terminology, sequence words (such as first, second, now, then) and direct statements using relevant verbs in the present tense, e.g. "Place the template face down on the material. Cut out two triangles."

Teachers need to be familiar with the purpose, organization and language features of the common genres that are necessary for academic success – for example, storytelling, describing, recounting, instructions and arguing a point of view. It is crucial for teachers to find ways of assisting their students to recognize and use different genres with competence and confidence – firstly in speaking and later on in their written language.

PRAGMATICS

When using language in any situation, the speaker needs to be mindful of the other people present, and take into account factors such as shared experience, their relationship to each other and their level of interest, whilst interacting with them. This ability to comprehend, adjust and produce language in real life situations, according to different or expected social and cultural rules is often referred to as competence in the area of *pragmatics*.

Even in a simple social conversation with a friend, there are 'rules' to follow! These rules may vary in different physical contexts, for example the school playground versus the doctor's waiting room.

- How close should I stand or sit?
- How often should I make eye contact?
- How long should I have my turn at talking?

- How can I 'interrupt' my friend if he/she is having a very long turn to talk?
- How can I change the topic we are talking about?
- Who else is nearby? How loud should I talk? Should I avoid saying some things?
- How much silence is tolerable?

A great program that looks at aspects such as those above is 'SOCIAL SAM' available from Pelican Talk Speech Therapy Resources (www.pelican-talk.com) . See below.

When we know the audience and the context, it is easier to choose a style of language and vocabulary that is familiar, appropriate and understood. When those we are speaking with are unknown to us, we will also have to consider factors such as their

- age and gender
- status
- facial expression, eye contact and body language
- language ability
- familiarity with the topic
- past experiences, including cultural background.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP?

Pragmatics involves knowing what to say, to whom, when, where and how. Some students are very adept at modifying their language use according to who is present and what is appropriate for the situation. Without apparent effort, they choose vocabulary and a style of language that engages rather than offends the listener.

Some individuals have real difficulty adjusting their language because of an inability to read the social cues or to see the situation from another person's perspective. A difficulty with pragmatics often coexists with other language difficulties, cognitive delay, hearing loss or social problems such as those on the Autism Spectrum. Many other young people in regular classrooms need extra assistance in this domain. We need to make the rules explicit for these students and provide practice opportunities so that they will learn to recognize cues and use their language appropriately.

Explicit Modelling.

Parents and teachers can help children understand more about social interactions by modelling their own thinking and strategies in given situations. For example, negotiating how to change an arrangement to meet with a friend - "I was wondering ... I have a problem on Thursday after school ... Would you mind if we ...?" Talking about how we use or adapt what we say to suit the situation and the people that we are with, helps children appreciate the power of their own language. Children need to learn to take into account the background, feelings and perspectives of others in order to avoid possible misinterpretations. They may need reminding about when to use formal versus informal language.

Puppets and toys.

Puppets can also be used to model appropriate or inappropriate behaviour and language that provides a platform for comment. For example, during morning newstime 'Bobby' the puppet continually fidgets with the pens on the table while a student is talking. Others in the group are invited to give their opinion about Bobby's manners and to explain what good listening involves.

A program that uses puppets to explore 25 common social skills and social behaviours is called SOCIAL PUPPETS (available at www.puppetsforlearning.com.au). This program comes with two puppet, scripts, ideas for discussion and certificates. It is a great one for preschool children.

You can also create a 'role-play' using plastic animals or doll figures to set the scene. It can focus on a particular problem, for example, some students intruding into their 'personal space'. Tell a story on the theme and ask the children to use the props. Afterwards ask for the children's comments and opinions.

For example: "Duck, pig and horse were very good friends and went everywhere together. They liked exploring, eating and resting together. But there was a problem with duck. He was becoming very annoying because he always wanted to get up very close to horse and pig – closer than they liked. Pig asked duck to move away a little, but duck kept edging closer and closer. Horse stared at duck and then moved away himself, but duck followed. Horse and pig didn't know what to do. They liked duck but they didn't like how duck was behaving. So they went to see owl – their wise old friend who was often asleep during the day. Owl talked to duck in his soft friendly voice. Owl explained to duck that his friends needed a little space around them to feel comfortable. When others feel uncomfortable they might start being rude or running away, not wanting you to be their friend. Slowly duck began to understand. "Close but not too close" duck quacked to himself as he ran, ate and swam with his friends, horse and pig. And when they rested in the paddock together, duck sat down 'close but not too close' and the three remained friends for a very long time."

Children's literature.

Many books describe and relate the consequences of 'good' and 'bad' behaviour, often in humorous ways. *For example, in her book titled "Manners", Aliko uses one page stories and comic style illustrations to demonstrate different behaviour in domains such as sharing, table manners, greeting others and interrupting (Greenwillow Books 1990).*

There are many books on social themes such as making friends, asking for help, teasing, sharing, obeying rules, co-operating etc. and these can be read and revisited many times.

Discussion can focus on a particular character – what was said and how, feelings and thoughts that lead to certain behaviour or reactions in others. Children will understand more about relationships and how to fit in with others if they have the opportunity to talk about different emotions, such as being nervous, cross, shy, bossy, jealous, bored and frightened. You can use puppets to retell the story or role-play the story. To emphasize the role of language in the story, make changes to what was said and how it was said and discuss how this might change the outcome of the story.

Role play.

Children enjoy taking on specific roles and acting out scenarios. A simple prop such as a walking stick, or picture of a character pinned to the clothes will set the scene for children to explore and discuss the type of language best suited to the character and situation (Language Interaction activities in Time for Talking, 1997).

Social Stories™.

Children usually learn social rules incidentally through everyday experiences and interactions with others. The consequences of their behaviour and the reaction by others help shape the successful use

of communication in a social context. Explanations and feedback by adults are an important part of this learning too. Other children need specific assistance...

Social Stories™ are a concept created by Carol Gray and are written to develop the social awareness and understanding that underlies much social communication (see www.thegraycenter.org/social-stories). SOCIAL SAM, a program from www.pelicanstalk.com teaches social understanding and also provides the user with 41 illustrated stories about common social situations. The story about “trying”, for example, teaches that it is not enough to simply call out “HELP!” whenever you need assistance. View the story free at www.pelicanstalk.com on the SOCIAL SAM page (find this via the PRODUCTS page).

Some professionals have created teaching tools, similar to Social Stories™ using live footage. This “video –modelling” of social skills and behaviours, again like Social Stories™, should have the underlying goal of teaching *social understanding*.

Speech balloons and thought bubbles.

An important part of successful social communication is understanding **that the words that come out of someone’s mouth don’t always match the thoughts in their head**. This can be very tricky for certain children to understand. Sarcasm is a classic example of this. Someone might look at your dirty shirt and say “Wow, nice clean shirt, ” but they are really thinking “Wow, what a dirty shirt.” Explicitly talking about and exploring what people are saying and guessing what they are thinking is a good activity for developing skills in the area of pragmatics.

Speech balloons and thought bubbles are a nice visual way to explore this concept. They can be added to any illustration that depicts a variety of people interacting with each other. These can be found in storybooks, magazines and advertisements.

TALKING PICTURES (Love and Reilly 2011) is a resource to stimulate discussion about pragmatics and the social use of language. It incorporates speech balloons and thought bubbles to be used when exploring five ‘busy’ scenes. As well providing many language activities, the kit helps children’s social thinking through the use of question prompt cards and a magnifying glass that encourages closer observation.

SUMMING UP

As well as nourishing each child’s language pie by ‘feeding in’ new vocabulary and ways of saying things, we need to ensure that we provide opportunities for children to use their language with a variety of people and in many different contexts. We need to model and discuss *how* we use our own language in a way that is appropriate to the listeners and to the situation. Many children will benefit from specific activities and games that focus on the important social aspects of language use and understanding.

SOME REFERENCES & RESOURCES

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