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# Teaching Pragmatic Language Awareness as an Integral Aspect of Reading and Language Arts Instruction

Monica Gordon Pershey

**The purpose of teaching pragmatic language awareness**

Many teachers are continually refining their instructional practices to offer an integrated language arts approach that engages learners in a variety of opportunities to interact with literature and its linguistic components. As Sawyer and Sawyer (1993) suggest, integrative classroom approaches involve lengthy and varied discussion about literature, use readings that are meaningful to learners, and help students overtly examine their own processes of thinking about language.

Engaging students in carefully examining how authors of their favorite books use language to construct text involves teachers facilitating classroom dialogue about the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic components of text. Teachers who are sensitive to how authors choose words to effect the writer's meaning and who share their own perceptions of the magic of words can inspire readers' semantic awareness. When teachers and students examine how an author crafts sentences by,

creatively manipulating word order to enhance the rhythm of the text, this sort of classroom talk about text may build syntactic awareness. In addition, collaborative investigation of pragmatic aspects of text, (i.e., function and purpose of text sentences or passages) can also be used to facilitate thoughtful group interaction about how authors fashion meaningful text messages.

## Defining pragmatic language

Pragmatic language theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) explores the dimensions of meaning behind spoken or written messages. The use, purpose, and/or intentions of speech or writing are examined. Pragmatic study rests on the assumption that language is used to interact purposefully with others.

The functions of language are many, including instrumental (stating personal needs by requests, polite hints, or persuasions); regulatory (telling others what to do by controlling behavior, feelings, or attitudes); interactional (helping people get along with others, establishing a bond, setting the tone for a relationship, or negotiating comfort between speakers); personal (expressing individuality in statements that discuss self-concept, air personal feelings and opinions, or describe one's own life and identity); imaginative (relating fantasy, in order to pretend or to create drama, poetry, or stories); heuristic (seeking information, questioning, exploring, investigating, wondering, and figuring); and informative (reporting facts or conclusions, describing or recalling events or information in a non-emotive fashion) (Halliday, 1973).

Three additional categories of function are divertive (promoting enjoyment for the speaker and listener, as in puns, riddles, jokes, and play on words); authoritative/contractual (articulating codes of law, contracts,

ceremonies, and rituals); and perpetuation (recording or memorializing passing events in documents such as diaries, journals, and letters) (Smith, 1977).

### **Pragmatic ability in oral discourse**

Children's use of these message intents is well documented (Cole, 1982; Dore, 1975; Garvey, 1975; Halliday, 1973). Specifically, by kindergarten, children are apt to have a well-established (although seemingly unconscious) productive use of the functions described by Halliday (1973) (Pellegrini, 1984b; Pinnell, 1975; Preece, 1987). For example, regulatory utterances are among the most frequently produced speech acts to be found in samples of language from preschoolers aged three to five. Messages which serve the personal function have been observed in the speech of children nearing age three. Heuristic language has been noted to develop incrementally in the dialogues of children aged 21 to 36 months. Use of the imaginative function is routinely recorded during four-year-olds' pretend play and in the sociodramatic play of kindergartners. In school age children, capable use of all ten message intents is well established. For a number of language sampling studies which substantiate the attainment of these milestones, see Black, 1979; Bloom and Lahey, 1978; Bloom, Rocissano and Hood, 1976; Bruner, 1975; Dore, 1975; Garvey, 1975; Halliday, 1973; Keenan, 1974; Pinnell, 1975; Umiker-Sebeok, 1979.

### **Pragmatic language in an integrated language arts approach**

Tannen (1982) proposes that the language of text can be investigated much as oral language has been explored: as purposeful messages shared by a sender and a receiver. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) and Calkins (1983) note that narrative text has similarities to oral conversation which may be comprehensible to young children. Myers (1982) maintains

that the pragmatic knowledge developed naturally in children's use of oral language can be transferred and applied to enhance comprehension of the function of the language in text. Instruction that teaches young readers to examine the language functions of text passages can provide opportunity for both oral and written response to text. "When teachers help children know what [pragmatic language is], they not only foster comprehension of a particular text but also help readers grow in their abilities to use language appropriately and effectively in different situations... [to] make children more competent language users" (Morgan, 1989, p. 237).

Given the opportunity to explore the pragmatic aspects of oral discourse and texts they read, young language users can begin to reflect on language properties and components (Bialystok, 1988). Metacognitive and metalingusitic monitoring is thus developed when attention is devoted to language structures in their oral and written contexts.

Research has shown that five, six, and seven year-old children use these language functions in their natural speech and upon elicitation testing, can be taught to be metalinguistically aware of how these functions can be found in prose. They then can consciously use these functions to comprehend narrative passages, appreciate author's purpose, and personally respond to text (Pershey, 1994). Instruction that helps students become metalinguistically aware of the message functions of text passages can enhance a young reader's understanding and enjoyment of literary text.

### **Instructional considerations when introducing pragmatic language awareness**

Comparisons between pragmatic message functions used in our daily spoken language and the language of texts can be explicitly brought to the attention of student readers. In some

fairy tales, for example, failure to obey a regulatory statement sets the plot in motion. If Cinderella had not failed to be home by midnight, the entire story would not have taken place.

Morgan (1989) cautions teachers that it cannot be assumed that even those children who appear to have full comprehension of text have any metalinguistic understanding of how to look at a message and analyze its function. Because "certain pragmatic features are exploited by children's writers for different purposes... awareness of these elements can deepen comprehension, extend the reader's communicative repertoire, and heighten aesthetic responses." (Morgan, 1989, p. 228). Students who engage in discussion of the imaginative aspects of a text, for example, or who examine an author's use of humor and their interpretations of it, are applying their awareness of message functions to extend their reactions to text.

Young readers require careful teacher modeling and explicit instruction that guides them in using their own language to respond to underlying pragmatic functions of language in texts. Given the opportunity, students can develop skill in the specific examination of the pragmatic aspects of text language. Students can be encouraged to build awareness of how metalinguistic aspects of reading comprehension are part of an overall appreciation of books and stories they enjoy.

Classroom discussion of the pragmatic aspects of text can support students in coming to view themselves as active and reactive readers. Students who become sensitive to the intention of written messages are learning to self-monitor the way that they think about text and react to it. Students may be guided to self-question while they learn. Some of these questions may well be about the pragmatic intent of text passages,

promoting three abilities to "occur simultaneously... 1) learning language; 2) learning through language; and 3) learning more about language" (Van Dongen, 1986, p. 3).

Exploration of pragmatic language will necessarily involve transfer of learning across language modalities (the oral and written channels). As Tierney (1982, p. 98-99) explains, in "conversation a listener forms a model of what the speaker is trying to say consistent with what the listener perceives the speaker's intentions to be. In reading text, a comprehender tries to form a model of what the author is trying to do." Thus, a classroom approach which teaches children to use conversational knowledge of language functions supports their ability to gather meaning from text and provides students with a practical example of how to transfer knowledge.

Children who experience interpreting message functions of every day oral language and can transfer this ability to examine language of written stories, gain the fundamental cognitive skill of transferring learnings across four language arts. This is key to an integrated approach to literacy acquisition.

### **Instructional approaches for language schemata**

The instructional approaches outlined in this article may facilitate students' awareness of message function and the related concerns of speaker's or author's purpose. Students who are familiar with any or all of the ten functions of language build schemata about message function. The functions become familiar categories into which they sort the language that they are listening to, reading, or using as speakers or writers. Students may come to recognize when language is being used to regulate the opinion of others as contrasted with language being used to emotionally portray personal experiences. This thinking entails inferencing, contributes to

response to text, enhances schema development, and transcends literal comprehension.

Although the approaches described below may suggest an instructional sequence, this does not need to be rigidly adhered to by teachers. Different groups of students, depending upon age and previous experiences, will require varying amounts of exposure to the first three approaches, designed to build background knowledge on pragmatics of language. Certain groups of students may need pragmatics instruction presented very specifically in a variety of ways. For other groups, their past interactions with books and language will have prepared them for incorporating their schemata about learning language and learning through language into new tasks emphasizing pragmatic language.

Approaches numbered four to seven are the essential parts of teaching practices. Here, pragmatics instruction is presented to extend students' range of language purposes. Constructing purposeful messages in Approaches six and seven is important to students who are engaged in producing authentic written products for a known audience, or who are delivering a lively group presentation to share response to text.

### **Approach 1: Teaching the concept of message function — mini-lesson**

Introducing students to the ten message functions may require several teacher-led mini-lessons involving direct explanation of the names of the functions and citing examples. Thompkins and Hoskisson (1995) and Morrow (1989) are sources for designing language arts mini-lessons as well as presenting simplified explanations and examples of Halliday's (1973) seven functions. Smith (1977) clearly explains



Halliday's seven functions as well as three additional functions.

In using suggested approaches, teachers may wish to create labels for the functions that are more similar to students' language. For instance, using "order" or "command" may substitute for the regulatory function and "for fun" may substitute for the divertive function.

Teachers will need to clearly describe the concept of message purpose and may wish to give examples of the ten language functions by using sentences from familiar texts. Or, use messages that have been spoken in class at varying times. A list of messages spoken during various classroom communication events, such as when students are speaking while working in cooperative groups, when teachers are giving directions, when a class member is reporting current events, and at other times will provide a bank of familiar messages whose functions can be analyzed.

## **Approach 2: Eliciting message function — role play during mini-lessons**

Myers and Gray (1983) maintain that pragmatic skill rests with how a speaker structures a message to correspond to the needs of a particular linguistic context or particular listener(s). To elicit use of message functions, teachers may wish to find opportunities for students to reveal their understanding of when to use a certain function in context. Pragmatic skill involves adapting to an interactional environment where a participant must both interpret and originate communicative acts appropriately and functionally.

In role playing students are asked to take on the role of another speaker and produce language functions in that role. This can be done through drawings or photographs showing

persons involved in communicative settings (e.g., accepting a bouquet of flowers from a delivery person, two firefighters conferring at the scene of a fire, a doctor administering an injection to a patient, a parent and child looking at a storybook together, and children gathered around a birthday cake lit with candles. Students are asked to supply what the persons portrayed might be saying. In this approach, the ability to speak for a character using proper function is required. Teachers follow up each scenario by discussing which message functions were used by students as they role played the persons pictured.

Pershey (1994) demonstrated that first graders can role play to elicit the heuristic, regulatory, personal, and imaginative functions. These first graders appeared to reveal complex communicative competence to integrate cognition, linguistic capability, and conventional social behavior thereby demonstrating pragmatic proficiency (Bruner, 1975; Pellegrini, 1985).

### **Approach 3: Application of pragmatic language awareness in the context of games — language center resources**

Students can construct a variety of games to challenge pragmatic language ability. These games will be available for use in a language center or for use at other times. For example, students can draw game boards similar to "Candyland" or "Monopoly" and create a pragmatic language game featuring a path leading from start to finish decorated with directives, such as "Pick a card," and have added interest with spaces that read "Go back 2 spaces," "Go ahead 3 spaces," and the like. Statements are written on cards that students generate from their daily spoken language unconsciously revealing knowledge of a variety of functions. Statements might read, "Can I borrow a pencil?" "If you take my snack, I'll tell Mom." "I like recess." "I think you did a good job sharing your journal

today." Players take turns picking a card from a common pile. A player who can correctly identify the function of the statement written on the card correctly will be able to move a given number of spaces along the path to winning the game by using dice or a spinner.

Alternative formats for games might include sorting many cards with written statements into their functional categories, using category label cards to separate piles, or may involve matching two different ways to convey similar meaning using different functions, as in matching a card that says "Let me see your drawing," with "Would you mind if I look at your artwork?" Similarly, a game wherein the function is supplied and students are asked to give a sample message can be designed. If, for example, a card reads "question" (a more colloquial way of characterizing the heuristic function), the student must offer a question in order to win a point or move ahead on a game board. It is important that students be encouraged to cooperatively create the game cards, so that the statements will reflect their common language use.

#### **Approach 4: Applying pragmatic analysis of language to analysis of environmental print — mini-lessons or games**

Students might benefit from the opportunity to learn how environmental print carries message function. Samples of messages serving regulatory (signs giving directions or warnings), perpetuating (commemorative postage stamps), or informative (price tags) functions can be collected and shared in teacher-led or student-led lessons and discussions may be placed in a language center. These will serve as sorting games, described in Approach 3, or turned into a class book on environmental print.

### Approach 5: Analysis of message function in narrative text using discussion, retelling, charting and mapping

Britton (1984) considers text to be "verbal object" — an "artifact" to be held up for different types of analysis. Knowledge of message function allows for analysis of elements of certain literary genres. The imaginative language function is used for descriptive purposes in fantasy; tales of adventure may begin with a warning (regulatory function) that is defied; and fables may end with a moral (authoritative function).

Small group discussion allows student readers to share interpretations of text and their awareness of message function. For example, as a component of literature for literature groups to discuss, learners may find certain pragmatic elements of text passages. They may find how a character used personal language to describe himself; detail how a character used heuristic language to puzzle about a conflict within the story; or see where a warning (regulatory) was given but not heeded, and with what results.

Retelling of text read or listened to may reveal how a reader comprehends and processes the material (Strickland et al, 1989). A retelling may reveal how the reader has transformed the text into the reader's own words and ideas. Metalinguistic awareness of message function is revealed through retellings (Pershey, 1994). For example, a student retelling *Solomon the Rusty Nail* (Steig, 1985) may say "The cat said, 'Turn back into a bunny at once!' He was telling Solomon what to do." The teacher may highlight how telling someone what to do functions as a command (regulatory function). Teachers who refer to message functions of text passages that the reteller mentions and discuss message functions in text after students retell text, may enhance metalinguistic awareness of message functions in text.

When students use comprehension strategies such as producing story maps or character charts, it is an additional opportunity for pragmatic language awareness to be integrated. The pragmatic function of key sentences or passages can be documented in a separate column of the chart or as an overlay or delegated portion of the map. This task will increase in its complexity as texts for older readers become more lengthy.

### **Approach 6: Producing text: Writing purposeful messages across the curriculum**

When responding to students' journals, teachers can respond to the message functions within entries. For example, a young writer stated, "I am 7 years old and I got everything I want." This child can be praised for using the personal function. A teacher's reply might ask him to tell about some of the things he has, which could lead to a use of the informative function, and subsequent praise for its use.

Common among some young writers is creating the same journal entries over and over. "I went to play soccer." "I went swimming." "I went out to eat." A potential strategy to vary the topic of their entries is through message functions. A teacher's response might invite the writer to tell something about the directions that a soccer coach gives, or ask if the writer knows swimming pool rules, thus allowing the writer to display knowledge of the regulatory function. Similarly, the correspondence between teacher and writer might be broadened if the teacher's reply asks the writer to identify his favorite restaurants or dishes (informative). This can lead to generalizing by function. The teacher encourages the writer to describe directions for other sports, rules in other places, or to inform the reader of other favorite places to go or other favorite things to do.

Some teachers offer journal prompts to their class in order to help anyone who may need a starter idea or practice in responding to prompts, a skill required by some mandated standardized tests. Functions can be starters, as in "Write an explanation (informative) of how to fix something." "Write your own joke (divertive)." "Write about something that you want and how you plan to get it (instrumental)."

Knowledge of message function provides students and teachers with a common working vocabulary for conferencing about written work. Increasing students' awareness of message function can help enliven their writing. A student who is working to create or revise a piece may need to change a message's wording to enliven the piece. In writing that is imaginative, persuasive, satirical, humorous or personal, message construction is key to the realization of these intents. If the student has written, "The robber snuck up behind Mike and grabbed him by the arm, saying, 'Give me your money,' the teacher may confer with the student so that the student might choose to rephrase the regulatory statement and rewrite the command for more realistic impact: "Hey! Gimme your money fast. Don't look at me!"

Revising to increase effective use of language (e.g., whether a paper needs more descriptive (imaginative), more explanation (informative), more personal tone, etc.) can be the subject of peer or teacher-student conferences. Knowing how messages function can help student writers craft statements that will effectively carry message intents.

### **Approach 7: Social interaction: Talking and listening in the classroom**

When talking and listening as members of a classroom community, students can improve their ability to

communicate with social appropriateness. Students who participate in collaborative work need to learn how to issue statements that are tactful and sensitive to the needs and feelings of other people. Kindness and manners can be reflected by choosing to use certain message functions in their appropriate interactional settings.

Awareness of social register is a pragmatic language skill. Speakers use different forms of address with different people, depending upon degree of familiarity, age, gender, and the social position of the persons participating in the interaction. As many teachers and parents might agree, children should know that they do not necessarily talk to adults in the classroom in the same fashion that children talk to one another outside of school as friends. Using proper message function to enact appropriate social register is a valuable pragmatic skill that teachers may enhance by proposing discussion about this component of language.

## Conclusion

Pragmatic language awareness contributes to an integrated language arts curriculum for literacy acquisition. Teaching pragmatic awareness includes encouraging readers to devote conscious attention to metalinguistic aspects of text by thinking and talking about the message functions that the text uses. To promote better student writing, pragmatic awareness teaches young writers that authors may craft their texts to achieve impact by conscious use of message function. Moreover, the value of productive classroom talk in learning all curricular subjects through language emphasizes the need for developing students' purposeful understanding and use of all language functions.

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