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Teaching Communicative Competence and Metalinguistic Awareness during Reading/Language Instruction

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Most elementary school children can be said to be linguistically competent. They have an internalized, implicit knowledge of the syntax of their language, understand and use a variety of words and pronounce the sounds of their language accurately. In addition to linguistic competence, however, students of elementary age are developing communicative competence, the ability to use language for a variety of purposes and in a variety of settings (Berko Gleason, 1997). At this age students can also be guided to consciously analyze how language is used in a variety of spoken and written contexts, a skill often known as metalinguistic awareness (deVilliers & deVilliers, 1978).

If upper elementary school children were questioned to determine their inner knowledge of the way that language is used in context, most could discuss aspects of their communicative competence. They may recognize that there are a variety of ways to use spoken and written language, such as to ask questions, provide comments, share information, and tell jokes. Older elementary school and middle school students are also likely to discern that speakers and writers modify their language to meet social expectations. They are aware of conventions that signal politeness or its opposite; they know that language can be modified to delimit social distance or to indicate familiarity, and they are aware of some of the linguistic conventions that are used in social roles.

Beyond the communicative competence that children exhibit, for example when behaving like well-socialized individuals, metalinguistic awareness helps children mature in their ability to learn about language. This awareness is brought about by consciously examining how language is used and thinking about how ideas are expressed through language. Metalinguistic awareness may be evidenced when learners consciously examine how they know what they unconsciously know about language. It is also seen when students demonstrate the ability

to use language meaningfully and consciously for a variety of intents: when students discover how they themselves prefer to communicate; when they observe something about their own writing styles, when they begin to appreciate different aspects of the task of communicating (such as editing a paper so that it uses interesting language), and when they can self-monitor these actions.

To provide children with instruction designed to facilitate communicative competence and metalinguistic awareness, it is necessary for teachers to possess a basic understanding of the linguistic system known as pragmatics. This article will describe the pragmatic language system and provide suggestions for enhancing communicative competence and metalinguistic awareness in the context of teaching reading/language arts. The activities suggested are appropriate for upper elementary and middle school students but may be adapted for use for students from grade three through high school.

Defining Pragmatic Language

Three systems of language competence are typically examined by linguists and language educators (Bloom and Lahey, 1978; Myers and Gray, 1983; Nelson, 1998). The first, the content system, describes how spoken or written phrases encode a speaker's or writer's knowledge of word meaning. This corresponds essentially to the study of a person's vocabulary, personal lexicon, or semantic competence. In the second system, linguistic form is analyzed. This includes analysis of a speaker's or writer's use of forms of grammar, syntax, and morphology (use of affixes).

The third linguistic system is pragmatics. Here, the use, purpose, or intention of a spoken or written message is under examination. Pragmatic analysis looks at what a message means, the intention it conveys, and how a message functions in a verbal interchange or in a written passage. Some common message functions are questions, requests, jokes, apologies, informational statements, and personal disclosures.

In conversation, pragmatic skill supports communicative competence. The pragmatically skilled individual adapts to an interactional environment and says what is appropriate to the situation and interprets the intention of messages spoken by another person. In writing, pragmatic skill helps a writer select a purpose for writing (e.g., to inform, persuade, correspond, create a contract) and conveys that purpose through a choice of words and sentence forms. In reading comprehension, pragmatic language capabilities allow a reader to form personal perceptions of an author's purpose (Goodman and Goodman, 1983; Hade, 1988; Morgan, 1989; Flowerdew, 1990; Pershey, 1998).

Pragmatic language skills are the base for communicative competence, a complex task that integrates cognition, linguistic proficiency, socialization skills, and awareness of oneself and one's surroundings (Mey, 1993). For instance, for a listener to interpret a speaker's indirect meaning (as when someone says, "Gee, that seat looks comfortable," to mean,"May I sit down?"), comprehension is dependent upon the listener's cognitive ability to infer coupled with shared social knowledge of socially acceptable communication forms. Theoretical research holds that pragmatic skills are both innate and socially conditioned (Chomsky, 1957; Bruner, 1978; Pinker, 1994). A speaker who experiences both success and failure interacting in a social field learns how to structure messages so that intention or purpose can best be conveyed. Speakers generally learn at a very young age how to "fine tune" messages, as Bruner put it, in order to fit the communicative needs of a social situation.

Pragmatic Language in Literacy Instruction

Students manifest varying degrees of communicative competence. It is possible for a student to have sufficient communicative competence but this knowledge is entirely unconscious. If a student is not overtly taught to analyze the function of messages found in conversation or text, he or she may never consciously realize that people hear, speak, read, and write messages for varying purposes. Perhaps a general awareness of questioning, responding, demanding, joking, etc., may be present, but a more elaborate and detailed understanding of message function may not be developed.

The ability to metalinguistically analyze messages found in conversation and text is a factor in literacy acquisition (Smith, 1977; Tannen, 1982; Morgan, 1989; Flowerdew, 1990; Pershey, 1998). For example, students who discuss the imaginative aspects of a text or who examine an author's use of humor are applying their metalinguistic awareness as they talk about their reactions to text. Through their verbal, written, and creative responses to literature, students use language to skillfully draw personal meaning from text. Students who are active readers, 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 simultaneously..."(1) learning language, (2) learning through language, and (3) learning more about language" (Van Dongen, 1986, p. 3). However, Morgan (1989) cautions teachers that it cannot be assumed that even those children who appear to have full comprehension of texts have any conscious metalinguistic understanding.

The instructional activities offered here may facilitate students' introduction to metalinguistic awareness of message

functions. Meaning can be constructed by learners as they actively engage in classroom talk and activities related to text. Teachers are encouraged to reduce or increase the complexity of these metalinguistic awareness activities to meet the instructional needs of their students. The instructional activities are presented essentially in sequence of difficulty. Different groups of students, however, depending upon age and previous experiences, may benefit from having the tasks presented in a modified sequence, as difficulty is likely to be a subjective decision.

Instruction that Fosters Metalinguistic Awareness

Introducing students to the concept of the function of a message may require several teacher-led lessons involving direct explanation of metalinguistic awareness. Students need to learn that language is actually something that can be thought about and analyzed. As Britton (1984) explains, language users can objectify a message and view language as a "verbal object" — an "artifact" to be held up for different types of analysis. Teachers are well acquainted with teaching students to analyze a message's informational value, its aesthetic or poetic appeal, its social impact, or its symbolism. In the present case, analysis focuses on the function of the language of the message. Familiarizing students with this practice will require direct explanation of the concept of message function as well as repeated practice in the use of selected and manageable parts of a codification system and repeated citation of examples. Dore, Gearhart, and Newman (1978) devised a codification system which identifies a range of pragmatic functions. While it is lengthy, using selected parts of this system may be workable for students. Their system is adapted by this author in the list below.

MESSAGE FUNCTIONS

I. Questions
- A. Choice questions (Is it red or green? Is this okay?)
- B. Informational questions (WH - questions)
- C. Indirect questions ("So this looks new" is an indirect request to learn more about the new item.)
- D. Rhetorical questions ("Know what?")
- E. Clarification questions

II. Requests
- A. Action requests ("Would you think about this until tomorrow?")
- B. Permission requests
- C. Indirect Requests ("I wouldn't want to go first," really means, "Would you go first?"
- D. Information requests

III. Regulators (regulates the behavior of another)

- A. Suggestions
- B. Commands
- C. Action requests ("Would you walk the dog?")
- D. Warnings
- E. Demands

IV. Assertions (reports facts or attitudes)

- A. Provide information (identify, label, describe, explain)
- B. State opinion (includes predictions, may include conclusions)
- C. Describing events ("It fell on the floor.")
- D. Personal report ("I'm sick." "I went to Sam's house." "I like cats." "I want to ride my bike." "I don't know." other disclosures and most complaints)
- E. Evaluations ("That cat seems smaller than mine;" conclusions)
- F. Rules, contracts, or laws
- G. Explanations ("The tape won't stick to the wall.")

V. Affiliations (statements which start, end, or maintain conversational language which allow language users to focus attention and/or bond)

- A. Claims ("That's mine." "I'm first.")
- B. Jokes, humor
- C. Teases
- D. Protests
- E. Attention getters ("Hi!" "Hey, Sue!")
- F. Speaker selections (calling on someone)
- G. Boundary markers (start, continue, or end a topic, as in, "By the way..." "And another thing..." "On the other hand...")
- H. Politeness markers (please, thank you, apology, etc.)
- I. Exclamations ("Oh, my!")
- J. Accompaniments ("Here you are." "There you go." "You're set.")
- K. Imaginative descriptions ("His eyes were as blue as the sea." includes exaggerations, boasting)

VI. Responses (responses to questions or requests)

- A. Response to choice questions
- B. Response to informational questions
- C. Response to process questions
- D. Response to indirect questions
- E. Response to rhetorical questions
- F. Response to clarification questions
- G. Compliances ("Yes, I'll do that." "No, I won't do that.")
- H. Qualifications ("Yes, I'll help you, but only once.")
- I. Agreements ("Yes, that's true.")
- J. Disagreements ("I don't think this is right.")
- K. Acknowledgments (Keeps conversation going: "Uh-huh." "I see.")

Activities for Teaching Communicative Competence and Metalinguistic Awareness of Message Function Listening

Students listen in school for several purposes, for example, to acquire information, to enjoy read-aloud of stories and poems, and/or to interact with others. Students can grow in communicative competence and metalinguistic awareness by learning to recognize a variety of message types and by determining how they do or do not fit a communicative context. The following activities are suggested to foster this capability.

Objective #1: Students will identify two or more examples of the following types of messages: request for action, demand, request for information, providing information, personal disclosure, warning, apology, indirect request, joke or humorous comment, contract, imaginative description, or other function.

Teachers may wish to prepare a game, chart, or discussion activity that encourages students to categorize and compare the functions of messages written on sentence strips. Sentences excerpted from familiar texts are a possible source of messages. Also, it is possible to jot down messages that have been spoken in class at varying times and use these as examples. Teachers can gather a sample of messages spoken during various classroom communication events. This bank of familiar messages can be used for analysis. Excerpts of films, video tapes, spoken recordings, or taped radio or television broadcasts can also be used. As an end result, students could develop a chart or bank of messages that exemplify a variety of message functions.

Objective #2: Students will contrast two ways of producing a similar message given sample sentences.

When talking and listening as members of a classroom community students are taught to communicate with social appropriateness. They are exposed to the opinions and feelings of many different people. Students who participate in collaborative work need to learn how to make statements that are tactful and sensitive to the needs and feelings of other people and learn to be good listeners.

Again, creating a game or chart is a useful way to enact this comparison. Using sources for sentences such as texts, conversations and TV shows, teachers can develop a bank of messages that shows how messages can convey subtle shifts in social distinctions when the overall function varies For example, a chart that compares direct and indirect requests may start with these four statements written on sentence strips for students to analyze and sort by type: "Mom, would you buy me a new video game?" "Mom, my video games are so old they are getting

ready for retirement." "I wish that I could fix my hair as cool as you do yours." "I don't know how to fix my hair the way that you do yours. Will you do it for me?" The speaker's mood, attitude, familiarity with the listener, motives, degree of politeness, age, etc., can all be discussed.

Speaking

In some classrooms, students' classroom talk is limited to responding to questions asked by teachers. In other classrooms, children work together to solve problems, create projects, perform plays and dramatic readings, debate ideas, share writings, and govern the classroom. Through these activities, they learn to use a variety of message functions. In addition, metalinguistic awareness of message function can be taught using activities similar to the following.

Objective #3: Students will structure a message to correspond to the needs of a particular linguistic context or listener(s). To elicit use of target message functions, students will take on the role of another speaker and use message functions in a role-play activity.

Role-play can be done by assembling an array of drawings or photographs that show persons involved in communicative settings, as in, for instance, a woman accepting a bouquet of flowers from a delivery man; two firefighters conferring at the scene of a fire; a doctor administering an injection to a patient; two drivers whose cars just collided; a family gathered around a birthday cake lit with candles. Students are asked to supply what the persons portrayed might be saying. In this task, 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. A chart or other means of recording outcomes may be used (Pershey, 1997).

While this may seem like a simple task, even older children may struggle for words in unfamiliar or challenging situations. By using relevant scenarios, this sort of practice may prepare students in advance for important events such as transitioning to middle school, going away to summer camp, meeting a new doctor, or moving to a new neighborhood. This activity may also help children build empathy for persons in challenging situations, as when new children arrive at their schools. The scenarios that are selected should have some practical importance for the students.

Objective #4: Students will engage in role playing concerning failed communication attempts and will analyze why and how the communication broke down.

Teachers can create brief scenarios that allow students to examine how the use of a selected message function can facilitate or inhibit communication. The teacher can

provide the entire script or ask students to improvise the dialogue for the scene. For example, a scenario where a student demands that a another student let him copy a homework assignment may be contrasted with a scenario where a student asks another student to sit down and explain how to do a certain math problem. The student in the former scenario is rejected and the student in the second scenario is helped. Students can chart reasons why this may have occurred due to changes in message function as well as in the overall nature of the request. Or, students can adopt the role of a character in a story who used an ineffective way of communicating and then tell the story passage using a more desired language function. This may be a part of guided practice leading toward a subsequent independent assignment in which each student writes a new passage for a story.

Objective #5: Students will use an appropriate social register for a given scenario.

Awareness of social register is a factor in communicative competence. Speakers use different forms of address with different people, depending upon degree of familiarity, age differences, gender differences, and the social position of the persons participating in the interaction.

Teachers may prepare a range of social scenarios that students can role-play. Meeting a new principal, knocking on a neighbor's door and asking to use the phone, asking a librarian to help find a book, showing a new student around the school, and other scenarios all demand appropriate selection of message function. Following the role-play, students can analyze and chart the functions of the messages used.

Reading

An understanding of the message functions used in text may serve to enhance a reader's understanding of text. Parallels between speech and the language of text need to be explicitly explained. When student readers share interpretations of text, they can also share their awareness of message function. For example, learners may be directed to find certain message functions in text passages. They may be asked to find how a character used personal language to describe himself; detail how a character used questions to puzzle about a conflict within the story; or see where a warning was given but not heeded.

In some cases, examination of the author's purpose is conducted at the phrase or sentence level and message function is assigned to a brief passage. At other times, students can look at the purpose of a lengthier portion of text or even make judgments about an entire text. Flexible use of metalinguistic analysis skills can contribute to the development of attentive and sophisticated readers.

Objective #6: Students will integrate knowledge of metalinguistic analysis into their use of comprehension strategies, such as group retellings or when producing story maps or character charts.

Teachers may highlight and discuss message functions in group discussions about text. Also, after students retell text, the functions used in the text may be referred to, analyzed, and charted. The function of key sentences or passages can be documented in a separate column of a comprehension chart or in an appropriate place on another form of graphic organizer.

Comprehension charts can be posted around the room and added to as students work their way through chapter books. Students can be given the opportunity write on a chart titled, "Warnings found in (*Title of Book*)," or "Requests for Action found in (*Title of Book*)." These messages may be from key passages that propel the plot and their explicit analysis may foster text comprehension.

Objective #7: Students will demonstrate awareness of the function of messages in environmental print. Younger students might benefit from the opportunity to learn how environmental print carries message function. Samples of messages that regulate behavior (as in signs giving directions or warnings) or that inform (as in price tags), etc., can be collected and shared in teacher-led or student-led lessons and discussions. Older students may apply their knowledge of message function to analyze the hidden messages of advertising, political campaign slogans, and other forms of propaganda. Poetry and song lyrics may also be examined.

Writing

Increasing students' awareness of message function can help enliven their writing. In writing that is persuasive, satirical, humorous, informative, or personal, message construction is key to the realization of these intents. Knowledge of how messages function can help a student writer craft statements that will carry intents effectively. A student who is working to create or revise a piece may need to change a message's wording, hence its function, to improve the piece. Teachers can demonstrate how this paraphrasing or revision is done. Sample sentences can be written on the board and students can be asked to alter their functions. For example, "I need to borrow $5.00" constitutes a direct action request. Students can be asked to write an indirect request, a command, a personal disclosure, a humorous comment, an explanation, a warning, or a contract and then describe how the revision varies in function and animates the initial request. Assessment of writing may partially entail evaluation of how well the writer applied classroom instruction in metalinguistic awareness.

Objective #8: Students will chart changes in use of message functions while revising and editing their work.

To document how students apply instruction in message function to their revising and editing, they can keep notes of the changes in message function that they make and can discuss these improvements during editing conferences with peers and teachers. Students and teachers will then have a common working vocabulary for conferencing about written work. Editing for effective use of language, for example, can look at whether a paper needs more imaginative description, more explanation, more personal tone, etc.

Objective #9: Students will respond to prompts based on categories of message function.

Some teachers offer journal prompts in order to help students who may need a starter or to provide practice in writing to prompts, a skill which is required by some standardized tests.

Functions can be starters, as in, "Write an explanation of how to fix something" or "Write your own joke." Larson (1975) suggests asking students to write about a given assumption or prediction.

A common problem among some young writers is that they essentially create the same journal entries over and over. "I went to soccer." "I went swimming." A teacher's response might ask the writer to tell about the directions that a soccer coach gives, or ask if the writer knows swimming pool rules. This can lead to generalizing by function, where the writer is encouraged to describe directions for other sports, rules in other places, or provide information about other favorite places to go or other favorite things to do.

Students may also keep their own list of future journal topics with a subdivision for topics listed by function. A list of ideas may include: "an explanation of how to make a beaded necklace," "a personal report of my trip to the shore," "my opinion about fishing," "a factual report about the price of video games."

Teachers may also use message functions to frame composition topics. For instance, rather than asking students to write about a sport, students can be asked to write a narrative that describes a sporting event, a dialogue that features two characters sharing opinions about a sport, a suggestion for the managers of a sports team, a request for information about a team, or a personal report of playing on a team.

Conclusion

Students can be taught to devote conscious attention to their own communicative competence and to metalinguistic analysis of message functions. To cultivate these capabilities, suggestions

have been presented for objectives which develop students' understanding and use of a variety of message functions during listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities.❖

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