Suppose We Begin with Pragmatics Instead of Syntax?
A Case for Designing Interactive Sessions for Adult ESL Learners

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Abstract

Of the two main modes of having a grip on a second or foreign language, namely, acquisition and learning, the latter forms an integral part of education world-wide. Instructed learning may be slow, the result may not be near-native like, and it does not provide the learner with enough self-confidence to 'speak up', despite the time and energy spent on learning. This paper argues that, once the basics of formal grammar are learnt by the end of school education, the learners can bypass those 'learnt rules' and straight away enter real life communication without the fear of grammatical inaccuracy. An outline of a syllabus for a short course with a sample module has been proposed.

Keywords: Pragmatics, communicative competence, metacognition, language socialisation and languaging

Introduction

Let me begin with two propositions: "What teachers see first in a second or a foreign language, is *grammar*." "Learners, in general welcome any additional language as another means of *communication*, based on their experience in the first language." To put it technically, we may say it is syntax vis-à-vis pragmatics. Thus begins the mismatch between teaching and learning a second language. Teachers are eager to teach the grammar of the unfamiliar language; learners simply want to use it in a social set up. The former's focus, from the beginning till the end,

is on grammatical accuracy; the latter is waiting impatiently to start functioning in that new language. Thus proceeds the mismatch. By the end of the five or ten-year programme, the teacher tests exclusively the written proficiency giving importance to grammar; the learner leaves the programme 'tongue-tied'. Thus ends the mismatch, tragically.

It is not a question of 'either-or,' but a matter of priority; no one, layman or linguist, would challenge the importance of syntax; knowing very well, meaning or message depends mainly on syntax. But beginning and ending with syntax creates problems for learners. Though unaware of the fact, learners are aiming at pragmatics, a little beyond syntax—language in use, language in society or speech community.

Profile of the Learner in This Study

The term 'adult' in the title needs clarification. Three types of SL learner-users are identified in this study; all have completed their school education. The first group, mainly from regional language medium with English as a compulsory component, pursues higher education either in the professional or the general stream. For them, another dose of formal language teaching is a burden or boredom.

> Education for students of all ages and in all subject areas is experiencing a paradigm shift that began about 40 years ago… The effects of this paradigm shift can be seen in the learning of literacy. No longer does it suffice for students to be able to comprehend the meanings intended by the authors of the texts they read, hear, and view. Now, students need to also be able to look beneath the explicit messages of texts in order to critically analyse what the authors are saying and not saying, what the authors' goals were in creating the texts, and how the authors are attempting to use the texts to accomplish their goals. (Jacobs et al., 2018, p. 15)

The second category consists of job seekers after graduation in various disciplines, especially in engineering and technology who, for the first time in their life, are forced to 'speak' English in natural contexts such as interviews. While children have no 'voice' in conventional classrooms to pronounce their demand, to project their identity, or to proclaim what they want and what they do not, adults may voice their concerns, especially those motivated by career prospects. It may be really a tough task to meet their demands, that too in short duration.

> The old assumptions generate questions about how to achieve norms, obedience, and correct answers. The new assumptions lead to questions about how to motivate for lifelong learning, how to strengthen self-discipline, how to awaken curiosity, and how to encourage creative risk in people of all ages." (Ferguson, 1980, p. 291)

Usually, the unemployed youth may be planning to leave their hometown or go abroad with certain degrees of professional or occupational competence. What reduces their self-esteem is lack of communication skills in 'the language of opportunities'. They join short-term crash courses, to get their needs fulfilled. A similar situation is that of the third category: those who are employed, but want to, or forced to improve their communication skills for both meeting the professional needs and for getting placed higher. Yet another category of adults is emerging that seeks support in communicating in English—the educated parent community—who want to help their school-going children at home, to supplement the proficiency they gain from regional language medium schools, and from the name-sake English medium schools.

The Two Paradigms of Language Learning and Language Education

The verb 'begin' in the title may not be overlooked; I am not trying to replace syntax with pragmatics; but just prioritising the latter over the former. The suggestion made here is something like "Let's focus on and begin with pragmatics; syntax may 'flow' simultaneously (not follow later)". The two broad paradigms that second language instruction passed through can be marked with the border line drawn by D.A. Wilkins, the British linguist who published a document in 1972, and later a slender volume *Notional Syllabuses* in 1976, together which proposed a marked deviation from the age-old form-based, structure and vocabulary-oriented second language instruction. The follow up work led by the Council of Europe gave a concrete form to this proposal, in terms of syllabuses, course materials and pedagogic guidelines, and the result was a new approach for second language instruction—communicative language teaching (CLT)—which was well-received world-wide. CLT prioritised pragmatics over syntax.

Review of Literature

As opposed to children, adults face more problems in learning a second

language. Factors such as motivation, age, socio-cultural and economic background, instructional settings and living and working environments too function as crucial factors affecting learning (Burt et al., 2003). However, whether the adult language is far inferior to that of children, is still being discussed (Debrowska et al., 2020). One major feature of adult interlanguage is that they focus more on function or meaning (Van Patten, 2004), while children follow formal features such as tense in the case of verbs and number in the case of nouns and gender in the case of nouns as in Hindi (whether *kitab* which means 'book' is masculine or feminine so that the verb can agree with gender of the noun). Age is not a matter of controversy' in adult second language learning; but how and how far the critical period affects is still being debated (Hakuta & Bialystok, 2003). Perhaps, another crucial factor is the mismatch between adult cognition and low the level of second language proficiency. This deficiency may largely curtail language production (Salthouse, 1982).

Pragmatics in Communicative Language Teaching

That pragmatic competence must be the aim of second or foreign language instruction is not something new to language pedagogy; but how to attain it was the concern for language educators. However, two landmarks in the evolution of language philosophy helped educators to find means of attaining pragmatic competence through formal instruction. The first was the result of a decade-long effort on developing a full-fledged theory of communicative competence by the American sociolinguist Dell Hymes (1962/1968, 1970, 1972). The second was the theoretical framework of Systemic-Functional linguistics (SFL) put forward by M.A.K. Halliday, the British linguist. His early works *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (1978) followed by *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (1985a) and *Language, Context, and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-Semiotic Perspective* (1985b) together helped language educators to think in terms of 'language in use or function' as opposed to the Chomskyan notion of 'language as form'.

Even while communicating in mother tongue, we all face blocks and barriers; but in informal situations they may not surface as strong as on formal occasions. A welcome speech or an inaugural address may not end up smoothly as we planned and expected. An interplay of quite a few non-linguistic affective factors decides the success or failure of our formal communication. It is interesting to note that while informal

communication is comparatively smooth and easy in our first language, it is more difficult in a second or foreign language. That is to say, when we observe our own oral functioning in two languages, the following linear depiction may represent their degrees of difficulty.

Functioning informally in the first language → Functioning formally in the first language → Functioning formally in a second language → Functioning informally in a second language. In fact, the progression, though linear in appearance, is circular in function. When one reaches the fourth stage, one becomes a compound bilingual, who has attained optimal proficiency in another language, as well. This point may lead the discussion to the two mutually related and complementary levels of language functioning namely, language socialisation and languaging.

Language Socialisation and Languaging

How to help an adolescent learner reach the last and the most desirable phase outlined in the preceding paragraph, namely 'functioning informally in a second language'? This paper tries to convince language educators that a pedagogical interpretation of the dual notions of language socialisation followed by languaging may help in this regard.

Pointing out the pitfalls in language acquisition studies, Ochs and Schieffelin (1984) state that 'cultural factors such as social organisation and local belief systems' were treated as a separate entity called context and kept outside language acquisition. An alternative mode—language socialisation—was suggested based on two premises.

1. The process of acquiring language is deeply affected by the process of becoming a competent member of a society.
2. The process of becoming a competent member of a society is realised to a large extent through language, by acquiring knowledge of its functions, social distribution, and interpretations in and across socially defined situations, i.e. through exchanges of language in particular situations (p. 277).

The mutually entangled relation between language and socialisation has been pointed out by Duff and Hornberger (2008) as 'socialisation to use language' and 'socialisation through the use of language'. Thus, the coexistence of language and socialisation makes it imperative that any attempt to teach language devoid of its social 'birth and breath' is likely to get delayed results, if not, turning into waste. (cf. the phrase

'the sociogenesis of second language' coined by Vygotsky's followers, Lantolf and Thorne (2006). Duff (2008) observes:

> One crucial aspect of language socialization …is that gaining competence in new ways of using language and representing meanings, including in our own primary languages, is an ongoing one that occurs throughout one's life, from birth to death. … In addition to being a lifelong process, language socialization and its accompanying discourse practices vary *across* the activities and communities one participates in at any given age or stage in life. (Duff, 2008. p. xiv)

When we begin with form or syntax, the input we provide gets 'twice-removed' from the 'social genesis of language'—first from message and then from speech community. On the other hand, pragmatic competence is the catalytic agent that quickens the flow of natural communication.

Though language socialisation and languaging are close relatives, this paper prefers to posit languaging first, to be followed by socialisation, just because the intensity of the mastery of the target language in the latter is closer to near-native proficiency. The notion of languaging, as "the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language" (Swain, 2006, p. 98) is a higher order mental faculty, and it comprises not just the articulated utterances but the mental processes at work behind the utterances, as well. Thus, the notion of the sociogenesis of language allows us to postulate speaking and thinking in a 'dialectal relationship', overlapping each other, and language as 'verbal thinking' (Masuda & Arnett, 2025). This stage may be characterised by cognitively employing language and linguistically exploring cognition. Haenen (2001) calls languaging "communicated thinking".

> Note that languaging is not just output, choral response or responses to patterns drills. Languaging is a way to mediate thinking and can be written or spoken. In this way, learners can use either L1 or L2 to verbalize about language concepts and structures. When learners engaged in verbalization, they are engaged in the process of making meaning. (Masuda & Arnett, 2025, p. 13)

Considering (a) the cognitive development of the adolescent learners, (b) their extrinsic motivation to have a grip on the 'language of opportunities', and (c) their perfect mastery of at least one language, it

may be suggested that the form-based syntax-oriented instruction may be replaced by a meaning-based, goal-oriented pragmatic approach. A framework can be suggested with the following six components in it: (a) priority of oracy over literacy, (b) a modified version of the functional-notional syllabus, (c) language exercises and tasks replaced by real life activities, (d) 'focus on for' being replaced by 'focus on form', (e) metalinguistic knowledge replaced by metacognitive awareness, and (f) minimum instructional materials and optimum authentic materials.

Since the need for 'beginning' with pragmatics has been asserted with fairly justifiable theoretical support, the remaining part of this paper discusses briefly the six components listed above, followed by a sample module that forms the syllabus of a crash course for adolescent ESL learners, along with transactional strategies and materials suggested.

Syntax and Pragmatics in SL Instruction: Converging and Diverging Points

The interrelation, complementary nature and especially the interplay among syntax, semantics and pragmatics in language in use, may form the basics of linguistic studies. These three aspects have been discussed separately exclusively for analytic and academic purposes, where such segmentation is allowed to a certain extent. Communication or language function does not occur in the absence of one of them. But, as stated earlier, pedagogy leaves gaps among them or better to say, second language instruction all over the world. ESL instruction in particular has been given priority over syntax, assuming once formal features (syntax) are introduced in the classroom, pragmatics may eventually follow when the SL learner turns into an SL speaker in future. However, recent research, especially in the post-CLT era, realises this absurdity of pragmatics getting overshadowed by syntax, proposes focus on the pragmatic aspects of language in use, rather than teaching how the alien language is structured. Ishihara and Cohen (2010), in their study of Japanese students of ESL, highlight the socio-cultural differences between Japanese and English communities and suggest that a form-focussed SL instruction may not suffice to attain cultural competence.

This paper, as stated at the outset, does not argue for replacing a form-focussed grammar or usage-based approach by a function-oriented, use-based pragmatic approach. Any exposure-poor classroom environment

demands certain degrees of instructed language input, till the learners later get optimal input from classroom, family or society. My proposal here is to *begin* with functioning in the target language and then to procced with a pragmatic approach, since the learners have already had the basics of formal grammar by the end of school education. The profile of the learners in this study has been outlined above.

At this point, a brief discussion on how a basic understanding of the syntactic-pragmatic relation helps the adult learner function in the target language seems to be relevant, so that a framework for a syllabus can be adopted or adapted, and modules can be prepared within the framework. Syntax operates at the sentence level, by checking whether the subject is a single noun, a noun phrase, a gerund and so on, and whether the verb agrees with the subject in terms of person, number and gender (as in the case of Hindi, not English). Pragmatics moves beyond the sentence into discourse, and quite often below the well-formed sentence, as well. For example, neither the query "Your name, please," nor the response "Harish," comes under the category of a well-formed sentence, according to traditional grammar. Pragmatics, not only agrees with this construction, but insists on it, too. Both syntax and pragmatics operate in communication, but at varying phases and degrees; the well-formedness of an utterance is taken care of by the mental faculties before articulation; whereas finishing touches of pragmatic functioning can be made possible partly while uttering as well—with the help of paralinguistic supports such as voice modulation, eye contact, body language and so on. While syntactic knowledge focuses on grammatical accuracy such as subject-verb agreement, pragmatic awareness adds acceptability and appropriacy. Pragmatic principles are essentially context-bound; formal grammar is more or less, context-neutral; the much-quoted phrase, "the ideal speaker-hearer" by Noam Chomsky is a clearly articulated proof. Pragmatics takes care of what syntax ignore, namely "grammatically irrelevant conditions" (Chomsky, 1965, p. 3). Pragmatics, on the other hand, is highly context-bound. Thus, the learner who was informed earlier at school that the construction, "Can you open the door?" is an interrogative; only much later realises that it is a request made by someone in a room on a hot afternoon, so that the room gets airy and a little cool.

Notional-Functional Syllabi Revisited

Space constraints do not allow a detailed analysis of the Notional-Functional Syllabus (NFS) of the 1970s, nor is it necessary since the communicative language teaching (CLT) methodology, which had its foundation on NFS—the combined works of D.A. Wilkins (1976) and J. Munby (1978)—had made the syllabus popular. Though it had been criticised mainly for not accommodating formal grammar instruction, which is essential in the case of exposure-poor learning situations, NFS provides the teacher with ample opportunities for including indigenous materials, innovative practices, local situations, etc. More importantly, enough space was left for learners for intervening in the teaching-learning process. Though mainstream teachers who refer pre-cast syllabuses, and tried out materials, this paper strongly recommends a teacher-made, notional-functional syllabus for the adolescent learners, since it offers space for individual needs, abilities and potentials.

Focus on Form in the End

The pertinent question at this point is how to deal with inadequate grammatical knowledge even after years of teaching? Of course, re-teaching the same thing the same way must be a waste for both the learners and the teacher. But, when the 'same thing', that is grammatical competence is inevitable, and has no substitute, what can be replaced is the way it has been taught so far. A distinction was made between the traditional treatment of grammar with focus on grammatical competence ('focus on forms'); and a recent approach dealing with formal grammar incidentally, with meaning-based, communication-oriented, interactive teaching (Long, 1991; Doughty & Williams, 1998 and Ellis, 2001). Since the course design proposed in this paper has its entire orientation towards learner needs, an interactive approach has been recommended in which hard spots of formal grammar for individual learners may be identified, and treated incidentally through means other than direct teaching. The 'other means' suggested here includes tasks and activities, but excludes language exercises.

Replacing Metalinguistics with Metacognition

Finally, the special course meant for post-secondary adult learners tries to avoid metalinguistic terms, or minimise their use; and in their

place, metacognitive awareness tasks will be included. As adults, learners have already possessed, though they are not aware of it, an ability to assess their own problem-solving skills, not only in terms of their success-failure, but the sources of success and failures, too. This awareness from real life can be 'cut-pasted' in the academic field, as well. Thus, the adolescent learner finds out why he went wrong on one occasion, whereas why he failed on a similar one. A learner at this stage may be capable of tracing whether a deviant form was an instance of overgeneralisation (sheep-*sheeps (pl)), oversimplification (*I had met her ten years ago.), fossilisation (*It's colour is blue.), L1 influence (*I and my father…), cultural intrusion (Your good name, please.), and so on.

A Sample Module of a Short Remedial Programme for Adult ESL Learners

Objectives

(i) To enable the learners to express themselves in the simplest, at the same time, the near-native ways.

(ii) To inculcate in the learners the notion of the right way of improving a second/foreign language is to keep functioning in it, without the fear of making mistakes.

(iii) To make the learners aware of the fact that, as in our first language, all utterances need not be 'well-formed' in the sense that each should have a subject, predicate, etc. and they should match each other. Short utterances, with subject or predicate not uttered, but implied, also are part of real-life communication.

Learning-Teaching Materials

Visual materials such as video clippings, short scenes from films, pictures and photographs, all of current relevance, and taste. Reading materials too should be chosen based on the interests of the adolescent learners.

Strategies Recommended

The whole interaction must be life-oriented—pair and group work, quiz, comments on news reports, opinion on films, sports, games, etc. with no one-way 'radio talk'.

Contents: Five-Minute Activities

(a) Working in pairs, let the learners choose the best expressions that suit

each situation. Then, let them compare that expression with the ones they generally use in the same situation.

Examples: 1. "Where's Mom?" "Mom is cleaning plates, glasses, utensils after lunch."

"Oh, Mom is *dishwashing*?"

"Yes. Is it the right way to put it?"

"Yes, one of the right ways. You can also say, "Mom is doing the dishes."

"I see, so simple. Any other way of saying the same thing?"

"Of course. We can also say, "Mom is washing up."

"Really! Still simpler." Any more such examples form our daily life?"

"Yea. Here are a few more."

More of such expressions:

- To change (= to change dress). Please wait. Let me go and change.
- To do the laundry (= to wash clothes). Usually, I do the whole laundry at home. I like it.
- To set the table (= to arrange the plates, glasses, utensils, etc., on the table before a meal). Will you set the table? Let me boil the soup.
- To clear the table (= removing dishes, utensils, and any leftover food, and sometimes wiping the surface of the table). If Dad is at home, clearing the table is his job!"
- More of such useful expressions to be used with real life references to persons, places, etc.
- Prepare the bed, make the bed, take out the trash, run errands, pick up, take a shower, brush the teeth, walk the dog, have a cup of tea, have a snack, get dressed, take a nap, etc.

Conclusion

An attempt has been made in this paper to convince teachers that a syllabus can be framed based on learner needs, and accordingly, learners can bypass the fear of grammatical accuracy, and convey the message directly and in simpler ways, following the socio-cultural norms of the target language. It has also been argued that our own cultural schema can be explored for attaining competence in another language. At a

later stage, reading of the literary and non-literary pieces in the target language may provide more prefabricated expressions, building blocks and chunks, that make communication fear-free.

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