2

Learning about Language Structure

Learning Outcomes

After reading this chapter, you should be able to . . .

- Identify what all languages have in common: language universals.
- Describe the phonology of English, including phonemes, pitch, stress, and representation of sounds in the English alphabet.
- Connect the study of morphology with the meaning units of words.
- Explain how syntax governs the formation of sentences.
- Describe ways that semantics represents meaning at the level of words, phrases, and sentences.
- Associate the study of pragmatics with contextual influences on language.
- Give examples of nonverbal communication and ways that English learners might send confusing nonverbal signals in the classroom.

Sample pages

Language is dynamic—and young people are usually on the cutting edge of language change.

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When I'm Fifteen

When I'm fifteen . . .
I want to be a moon fixer—
The pieces that fall off
To glue them back on.
'Cause they lean over too far.
I want to kill bugs
And put flies on them,
And catch cats and
Put them back in their houses.

Sebastien G-E, age 4 Trilingual: Hungarian, English, French

Language—what it can do for us! It allows us to express hopes and dreams, as this young boy has done in his chat with a friend. 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). One of the fascinating aspects of language is that speakers learn their first language without understanding how language "works." 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."

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.

Sample pages

Language Universals

In 2014, 7,106 languages were spoken in today's world (SIL International, 2015). Although not all of these have been intensely studied, linguists have carried out enough investigations over the centuries to posit some universal aspects of language.

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 *podcast* and *cyberchondria*. 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; at one time, the vowel sounds in *tie*, *sky*, and *high* did not rhyme. Even common words such as *tomato* and *park* are pronounced differently depending on which part of the country the speaker is from, indicating that part of the dynamics of language comes from dialect differences.

Morphological (word form) changes have occurred in English, such as the gradual elimination of declension endings (the change, usually in the ending of a noun, verb, or adjective that indicates case, number, or gender). 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 (English pronouns retain case differences similar in function to what nouns once had in Old English: nominative (I/we/he/she/they) versus objective (me/him/her/us/them). Dropping case endings on nouns greatly simplified

English word forms. Other changes occurred, serving different purposes. For example, using the single form *you* for second person has allowed speakers of English to avoid having to use language that reflects status and intimacy distinctions such as those still preserved in German (Sie/du) and French (vous/tu).

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, the boy fell in love with a young girl, July" (meaning "Julie")—rather than correcting the misspelling, a teacher can consider that "July" may be a great 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 powerful and flexible psychological tool.

VIDEO 2.1 Although many animals are said to have the capacity for language, human language is a unique function of the human brain. This video comprises a rather long lecture by Steven Pinker about the cognitive aspects of linguistics. After watching as much of this video as interests you, see if you can summarize the key elements of language that are the most fascinating to those who study the human brain.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-B_ONJIEcE

Sample pages

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.

Although complex, one's native language is acquired in childhood by nearly all human beings. Every normal child, born anywhere in the world, of any racial, geographical, social, or economic heritage, is capable of learning any first 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 both 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, nouns, verbs) 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.

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.

The following sections present the structure of language in a systematic way. However, the distinctions between phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics only exist for purposes of analysis. In truth, when any human communicative interaction occurs, these separate systems meld seamlessly to create and communicate meaning.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING 2.1 Click here to check your understanding of this section's content.

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 in their language.

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.

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—*speak*, *respect*, *grasp*—but uses /tr/ in only two—*trial*, *metro*. Spanish, on the other hand, uses the sequence /sp/ medially—*español*—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—"braft" is not, although it would be phonologically permissible. "Nkaft," on the other hand, is not permissible because /nk/ is not an initial cluster in English.

Sample pages

Classroom Connection *Could It Be English?*

Which of the following are *possible* English words, and which would be *impossible* because they do not fit the English sound system?

dschang	*nde*	*jëfandikoo*
borogrove	*jabberwocky*	*takkies*

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). 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.

Although learners may be able to articulate all the phonemes in their native language, they do not necessarily have phonemic awareness—such knowledge as what a sound unit is, how many phonemes are in a given word, and how one phoneme may change the sound of an adjacent one.

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. Speakers of English as a second language must learn to properly stress syllables in a word or words in a sentence, because in American English, syllables and words are not said with equal stress: The stressed syllables and words are emphasized with a higher pitch, a louder volume, and/or a longer vowel.

There are some rules to follow when learning what to stress. For example, in compound words, the first syllable is stressed: *checkbook, take-out, cell phone*. When saying proper nouns, the rule is opposite: the last word in a phrase is stressed: Statue of Liberty, Golden Gate Bridge, President Clinton. A similar rule is followed for abbreviations: the last initial is emphasized: Ph.D., IBM, HBO. With homonyms, the first syllable is accented for nouns, the second for verbs: Project/project, record/record (Wilner & Feinstein-Whitaker, 2008).

One aspect of English pronunciation that is often difficult for English learners is the fact that English speakers not only reduce the vowels in unaccented syllables to the schwa sound, but also de-emphasize unimportant words in a sentence, creating a strong contrast that highlights the focus of meaning. Contractions—shortened forms of pronoun–auxiliary verb combinations—are one form of de-emphasis, and reductions are another ("n" for *and*; "'e" for *he*; "'er" for *her*). These elements may require focused listening training, especially because pronouns carry important contextual information, without which a listener may become confused (Gilbert, 2006).

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.

Native speakers are seldom if ever explicitly taught 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.

Sample pages

VIDEO 2.2 This video offers "tips" on how a nonnative speaker of English can learn to sound more like a native speaker. After watching the video, evaluate these suggestions. Do you think they would be effective? Why or why not?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChZJ1Q3GSuI

The Sound System as Written Language

No language has a writing system in which letters exactly represent the corresponding sounds. One letter may have two sounds, and a sound may be written more than one way. Linguists use phonemic transcription to represent sounds in a consistent way, using slash marks to indicate phonemes (for example, /m/ for the first phoneme in *make*). For even more precise rendering, linguists use a phonetic transcription, employing brackets. For example, some people pronounce *which* and *witch* alike, using the phoneme /w/. Others distinguish these words using a [w^h] sound for *which*. Using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), linguists can describe pronunciation more exactly than written alphabets can represent.

People have long complained that spelling in English is irregular and thus difficult. One reason that English spelling is irregular is that approximately 60 percent of the words in English come from other languages, and sometimes these languages send along their own spelling when borrowed (*Caesar*). Related words with similar roots may have contrasting pronunciation, such as *medical* and *medicine* (the *c* is pronounced as *k* in one and as *s* in the other). Silent letters are not always better eliminated; for example, *g* in *sign* is silent, but it remains as a holdover from its relative, the *g* that is pronounced in *signify*. People may complain that homonyms should be spelled the same, but the visual distinction serves a purpose to clarify meanings when written (*Rome, roam*). Moreover, even if they were spelled the same, some homonyms would still diverge in some dialects (the words *are* and *our* are homonyms only in certain dialects). Therefore the current spelling system, although inconsistent, is not always illogical (Freeman & Freeman, 1998).

Did You Know?

English has eight ways to spell the phoneme /z/:

single z: *zip* | ds: *pads* | s: *design*
double z: *jazz* | initial x: *Xerox* | ss: *scissor*

English has eleven ways to spell the phoneme /i/:

single e: *be* | i with final silent e: *Vaseline* | oe: *people*
double ee: *beet* | e with final silent e: *serene* | oe: *amoeba*
ea: *beat* | ie: *believe* | ey: *key*
ei: *receive* | ae: *Caesar*

English has ten ways to spell the phoneme /aî/:

i with final silent e: *bite* | is: *island* | ai: *aisle*
i followed by ght: *sight* | y: *by* | ei: *height*
ign: *sign* | ye: *dye* | oi: *choir*
ia: *liar*

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING 2.2 Click here to check your understanding of this section's content.

Sample pages

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 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 /iz/ (*bushes*).

Morphemes are of different types and serve different purposes. **Free morphemes** can stand alone and cannot be divided (*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 (*-s-* in the plural form *mothers-in-law*).

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.

Classroom Connection *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.

Classroom Connection *Creating New Words*

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.

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Clipping. The process of shortening words, such as the slangy *prof* for *professor* or *teach* for *teacher*, is called **clipping**. 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*?

Computer/Text Abbreviations. Acronyms are also used to text or type using a computer or cell phone. Examples include BRB (be right back), CYL (catch you later), CYT (see you tomorrow), IMHO (in my humble opinion), LMK (let me know), NM (never mind), ROFL (rolling on the floor laughing), and WTH (what the heck). For a glossary of chat room abbreviations, enter "chat room acronyms" in a web browser.

Blends. A word formed from parts of two words is called a **blend**—for example, *smog* from *smoke* + *fog*, *brunch* from *breakfast* + *lunch*, and *blog* from *web* + *log*. The prefixes *e-* and *i-* have

combined to form many new words and concepts over recent decades (e.g., *e-commerce* and *iTunes*). Students can become word detectives and discover new blends through shopping (Walmart?) or advertisements, or add to their enjoyment of learning English by finding new words and creating their own. The study of morphology adds fun to learning English as well as word power.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING 2.3 Click here to check your understanding of this section's content.

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. For example, 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.

All native speakers of a language can distinguish syntactically correct from syntactically incorrect combinations of words. 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.

Fortunately, speakers of a language who have 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 preschool student's poem cited at the beginning of this chapter, are still comprehensible.

Sample pages

Adapted Instruction

English Syntax and Mandarin Speakers

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

- **Verb tense:** *Yesterday I see him.* (In Mandarin, 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 Mandarin, verbs do not change form to create subject–verb agreement.)
- **Word order:** *I at home ate.* (In Mandarin, 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 Mandarin, like English, the marker indicates number, but in English the noun form changes as well.)

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 later in this chapter).

Adapted Instruction

Teaching Grammar

Grammar need not be a difficult or boring subject. Grammar rules for forming verb tenses in English, for example, are easy to learn; only about fifty commonly used verbs are irregular, and the rules for irregular verbs have their own consistency (see Jesness, 2004). Parts of speech are used in a regular way. Teachers who take the time to become proficient in discussing the rules of grammar are much more effective teachers of English to speakers of other languages. There are many amusing ways to teach grammar, like asking absurd questions ("Do you sleep in the doghouse?") to help students use negative sentences ("No, I don't.").

Classroom Connection *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 English. The students then write the standard phrase on the right side of the poster.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING 2.4 Click here to check your understanding of this section's content.

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, Rodman, & Hyams, 2010).

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 to them). 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, which has greatly enlarged the size of the English lexicon. One estimator of English vocabulary, the Global Language Monitor, places the number of words at over a million words. Fortunately, only about 200,000 words are in common use, and an educated person uses about 2,000 in a week. The challenge when learning this vast vocabulary is to distinguish denotations, connotations, and other shades of meaning.

Adapted Instruction

Denotations and Connotations

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

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About two-thirds of English words did not originate in English, but are borrowed from around the world. English has borrowed words for beasts (*aardvark*, from Afrikaans, *zebra* from Bantu), for food and drink (*coffee* from Arabic, *pretzel* from German, *paprika* from Hungarian), or clothes (*khaki* from Urdu), for dances (*tango* from Ibibio, *hula* from Hawai'ian), spiritual ideas (*messiah* from Hebrew), vices (*cigar* from Maya), politics (*caucus* from Iroquois, *fascist* from Italian), and for miscellaneous ideas (*berserk* from Norse, *sleazy* from Latvian, *kowtow* from Mandarin). Our world would be impoverished without these loanwords to discuss such things as spices, samba, and the martial arts!

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.

Speakers of a language must also 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 academic 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.

Semantics also includes word meanings that have become overused and trite. A list of clichés to avoid in the near future: *proactive, utilized, closure, über, basically, whatever, touch base, absolutely,* and *no problem.*

Classroom Connection *Learning Synonyms*

Each week, Mrs. Arias selects five to eight groups of synonyms from a list. 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 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.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING 2.5 Click here to check your understanding of this section's content.

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

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narrative—knowing how to tell a story, give a book report, or recount events of the day. Because these pragmatic ways of using speech vary depending on language and culture, teachers who understand these differences can help learners to adjust their pragmatics to those that "work" when speaking English.

Language Functions

Halliday (1978) distinguished seven different functions for language: *instrumental* (getting needs met); *regulatory* (controlling 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.

VIDEO 2.3 This video presents a quick review of Halliday's language functions. After watching this video, reflect on your favorite teacher from your K–12 schooling experience. What functions of language do you think were most frequent in this teacher's classroom?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVUSMFggeww

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:** Encourage students to share 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, G. S. (1985). Ways to look at the functions of children's language. In A. Jaggar & M. Smith-Burke (Eds.), *Observing the language learner* (pp. 57–72). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Sample pages

Appropriate Language

To be **appropriate** in speech, 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.

Classroom Connection *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 which to linguists means "a predictable format for taking turns". There are procedures for turn taking, for introducing and maintaining topics, and for clarifying misunderstandings.

Classroom Interacting Patterns. Classroom procedures have patterns, 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 patterns in their own countries and find a different one in U.S. schools. 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 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. 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.

Conversational Repair. When misunderstandings occur or conversation is disrupted, **conversation repair** may be used to restore communication. 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.

Classroom Discourse. Although classroom discourse patterns vary greatly across cultures, they also show some remarkable similarities. For example, research on U.S. classrooms shows that teachers talk about 70 percent of the time, and when they talk, about 60 percent of the time they ask questions that students are expected to answer. Often these questions are "display" questions that ask students to answer quickly with information that has been memorized. Typically, students are given less than one second to respond (Andrews, 2001).

Many students have difficulty learning the classroom discourse patterns of another culture:

> I was surrounded by Americans with whom I couldn't follow their tempo of discussion half of the time. . . . I was afraid I would say something wrong. I had the idea but not the words. (Barna, 2007, p. 68)

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING 2.6 Click here to check your understanding of this section's content.

Nonverbal Communication

A complex **nonverbal communication** 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

Sample pages

system involves sending and receiving messages through gesture, facial expression, eye contact, posture, and tone of voice. Because this nonverbal system plays a large role in the emotional message given and received, awareness of its various aspects helps teachers to recognize students' nonverbal messages.

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. 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 engaged are often seen as more successful academically.

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.

Sample pages

Classroom Connection *Teaching Students the Meaning of Gestures*

Preteach and demonstrate the twelve gestures that accompany the following phrases. Form groups in circles of four or five. Give each a set of twenty-four cards (two each of the twelve gestures). A student from each group picks a card and acts out the gesture on the card. The other group members must try to guess the expression that goes with the card. When someone has guessed correctly, the turn passes to the next person in the circle. The first group to get through all the cards wins the game.

1. Please come over here.
2. Don't worry!
3. Psst! Over here!
4. I'm hoping!
5. Good work!
6. I'm cold!
7. Don't tell!
8. I'm bored . . .

Source: Based on Saslow, J., & Ascher, A. (2006). *Top Notch 2 Copy & go.* White Plains, NY: Pearson Longman.

Facial Expressions

Through the use of eyebrows, eyes, cheeks, nose, lips, tongue, and chin, people nonverbally signal any number of emotions, opinions, and moods. 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 sometimes perceived by others as being emotionally superficial because of the amount of smiling they do, even to strangers. In some cultures, smiles are reserved for close friends and family.

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 a **communicative distance** between themselves and others, an invisible wall or "bubble" that defines a person's personal space. 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.

Source: Adapted from Arias, I. (1996). Proxemics in the ESL classroom. *Forum, 34*(1).

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. For speakers of English, 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.

With an awareness of mainstream U.S. conceptions of time, teachers become 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.

Sample pages

Classroom Connection *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.

VIDEO 2.4 As we have seen, nonverbal elements of language are just as important as verbal elements when learning to communicate in another language. In this video, Dr. Irma Olmedo contrasts "cultural" and "linguistic" challenges of learning a second language (by cultural challenges she means nonverbal aspects). After watching the video, review the examples she gives about the challenges linguistically and culturally diverse students face when they ask questions in class. Can you add examples of other situations that might pose a similar classroom challenge?

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING 2.7 Click here to check your understanding of this section's content.

SUMMARY

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). Understanding the basics of language helps to make language learning a meaningful, purposeful, and shared endeavor.

CHAPTER SCENARIOS 2 Click here to gauge your understanding of the concepts in this chapter.

Sample pages

LEARNING MORE

Thinking It Over

What do people need to know to talk to one another? List as many rules as you can that you think must be followed by people who are interacting in face-to-face conversations. How do children learn these rules? (Adapted from Farrell, 2006)

Web Search

To learn more about the subsystems of language, "Dr. Goodword's Office" at alphadictionary.com provides short, amusing, enlightening essays. Try these:

- How to Pronounce "Ghoti"
- But There Are No Such Things as Words!
- Do I Have to Pay Syntax?
- Can Colorless Green Ideas Sleep Furiously?

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 predictable language routines for the checkout, begin to pay attention to the predictable discourse patterns in your classroom.

Try It in the Classroom

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.

Sample pages