

Pragmatics: The Deep Meaning of Utterances in Context

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Abstract

“Pragmatics” is an important field in any language that deals with the hidden and deep meaning of a certain utterance, and tends to explore the intention of the speaker who is the only one to know the exact meaning of his/ her words. In order to understand the deep meaning of pragmatics, the researchers have decided to distribute a questionnaire among (14) male and female students at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in the Foundation Year (FY) at Ibri College. What has been reached is that in order to comprehend well the speaker’s utterances, it is not enough to only deal with the surface structure: vocabulary, grammar, etc., but also to go deeper so as to know the possible intentions of the speaker or writer. Implications, applications, discussion, recommendations, suggestions, will be pointed out in the following pages.

Keywords: comprehend, context, explore, interface, listener, pragmatics, speaker, utterances

Introduction

As long as comprehension cannot be wholly achieved, utterances, words, and sentences should be interpreted throughout the context to know, or at least guess what the speaker has in mind. Some factors are to be present while tackling a certain piece of literature; the cultural and educational backgrounds of the target language should be in harmony with each other which plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between the two different cultures(speaker’s and listener’s). This paper sheds some light on comprehending “Pragmatics”, and explores the deep meaning and the possible intentions of the speaker, or writer.

Literature Review

Pragmatics is the branch of linguistics that deals with language use in context. It looks at the meaning linguistic utterances can have beyond their literal meaning (implicature), and also at presupposition and turn taking in conversation. Thus, pragmatics lies on the interface between language and social cognition (Smith & Woensdregt, 2017, Para. 1).

Abbeduto, (2008, Para. 2) “Pragmatics can be defined as the intentional use of language to interact with people”. Williamson, (2014, Para. 1) defines Pragmatics as “The ability to comprehend and produce a communicative act is referred to as pragmatic competence. Pragmatics, then, examines the factors that influence our choice of language in social interactions and the effects our choices have on others”.

Siddiqi, (2018, Para. 1) "Pragmatics is a major study of linguistics that defines the hidden meaning of a writer and speaker towards the conjoining effort of linguistic form".

Normally, for teachers, the content of the textbook plays an important and crucial role in introducing the material in class; they –teachers-highlight all items mentioned in the unit concerned; vocabulary, certain elements such as semantics, grammatical usages, pragmatic issues, etc.

Context is everything. Who exactly are you speaking to (or writing for)? What is your relationship with them? Is the setting familiar or informal, or perhaps rather formal? The answers to these questions, and others like them, determine the vocabulary choices which are most appropriate to the situation (Rundell, (n.d.) Para. 1).

Pragmatics is not, will not, and cannot be used or highlighted in isolation; it should be used in a certain context and discussed in detail. It is different than **Semantics** that has a clear meaning on the surface, and that is why it should be tackled in a different way. People from different ages paraphrase pragmatic uses in different ways, and from their own perspectives. Children, however, are different as their knowledge and experience in life are still limited. Normally, naturally and unintentionally, they –sometimes-tend to use body language such as signals, gestures, and some movements to convey a certain message to the audience. They may cough, cry, or shout in order to let others feel their presence, or take care of them. Moreover, they may extend their arms using some utterances of their own to somebody to carry them.

The social pragmatic models are interested in the child using meaningful language and whether or not they are able to use their language in different contexts, with different people, and for different purposes. This is about communication: how the child uses gestures, facial expressions, and body movements in meaningful and appropriate ways within their interactions to fit their context before you start mapping language on to it. (Brown, 2019, Para. 4).

Expressions and words of a certain language may have different meanings, depending on the context that makes things as clear as possible, with no ambiguity. Consider the following:

"It is too hot for the chicken to eat" .This sentence has at least three meanings:

1. The weather is too hot today, and that is why the chicken cannot eat.
2. The chicken is cooked, but still too hot to eat.
3. The chicken is cooked, and is too spicy to eat.

All of the above meanings are possible, but which one is to adopt? Well, the answer comes from the speaker himself who said that sentence.

A close examination of most words reveals that they have many different senses and the rules which combine them into sentence meanings will frequently yield several possibilities for interpretation. Usually we resolve potential ambiguity unconsciously- unless someone carefully constructs a joke which turns on an ambiguity. (Ladusaw, (n.d), Para. 5).

“The scientific literature on autism has infrequently addressed the value of studying how people with disorder use language for social communication, sometimes known as the pragmatic aspect of speech development” (Mandy & Skuse, 2012, Para. 5). It is so hard to get the exact deep meaning of a certain utterance unless there is a sort of coherence that makes the current speech connected together. To get the proper meaning means being aware of the literal and tiny things in the utterance, otherwise, using jokes could be used nonliterally.

Another important aspect in pragmatics, is about guaranteeing coherence and structure in a conversation. For example, taking turns when we speak, initiating and rounding up a topic or adding important details to the latter. When we speak, we may express ourselves in literal ways, describing exactly what we want to say or nonliteral ways using irony or jokes (Gonzalez, 2019, Para. 3).

Children may encounter a number of problems when communicating with adults; they cannot express themselves fully in social situations and this may cause some misunderstanding, or using different words which mean different, or even strange meaning. Adults, however, should be careful and should use simple and clear words with little children, especially the expressions related to emotions. “Social language skills, in other words pragmatics, are essential for kids to develop communication skills in order to interact appropriately with others, improving their comprehension capacity and the way they express emotions”. (Gonzalez, 2019, Para.5). Moreover, children normally fail to build good relations with others, peers, in particular, if they are not keen on knowing the principles and basics of Pragmatics. This may change the meaning to convey to the audience. Children should be exposed to authentic situations and mix with others; whether peers or adults, so as to have the threshold of using the pragmatic items correctly.

Children with Pragmatic Language Difficulties often have difficulty with peers and forming friendships. These children benefit from multiple opportunities to practice these skills in a variety of contexts. Many of these children benefit from a peer model (child without Pragmatic Language difficulties) to help demonstrate the correct usage of social skills. (Murnick, 2013, Para.4).

Having the opportunity to learn a foreign or second language is a merit for learners; it has become easier to know, learn, and use new expressions while utilizing pragmatics in the proper way, as well as new vocabulary and formulae to interact positively with less or no misunderstanding.

Role plays have long been a favored way of gathering evidence of a speakers’ second language pragmatic competence. ...An implicit assumption of role plays for proficiency assessment is that language learners have had enough exposure to a foreign/ second language to have acquired sufficient lexical or formulaic resources to go beyond transferring first language pragmatic formulae into the simulated interaction. (Ross, 2020, Para. 1).

The expression, “***In other words***”, has not been initiated randomly; on the contrary, it plays a very major role in paraphrasing the speaker’s words and, or, intentions. Almost all times the superficial meaning is different than the deep one- the one meant by the speaker. Even gestures might have more than one meaning. While driving, if a person stops you telling you that his/her car has collapsed, you may

understand that he needs your help fix it, while what he may mean he needs a lift. So having a full understanding of the hidden meaning saves time and effort. "A foundational feature of human communication lies in the fact that what a speaker means often goes beyond the literal meaning of what the speaker says"(Papafragou, 2018, Para. 1). See the following quotation as a real evidence of how different the two meanings are:

"I've got a flat tire" can therefore vary between a request to fix or replace the tire to a request for a lift or turning down the request for a lift, depending entirely on the addressee, setting, and circumstance of the message (Stadler, 2018, Para.10).

Language and usages are like grease, once caught, they escape. This needs much narrowing the gap between what the speaker uses, and what the real and exact meaning is. "For the child learner, becoming pragmatically competent means becoming able to bridge the gap between what words and sentences mean and what the speaker intended to communicate by uttering them in a specific context"(Papafragou, 2018, Para. 2).

Questionnaire Analysis

In order to gather more information about the topic, a survey was conducted among (14) Foundation Program students enrolled at Ibri College of Applied Sciences- the Sultanate of Oman. The study is conducted by the means of a questionnaire that consists of 10 items. The first part contains 5 (agree/disagree) questions, while the second consists of 5 (yes/ no) questions.

The analysis of the results for the first part of the questionnaire, (agree/disagree), shows that (85.7%) of the participants admit that their full understanding and comprehension of the material they read is different than that of their colleagues in the class. This finding gets in line with what has been stated earlier in the literature review section. It has been found that a close examination of most words reveals that they have many different senses and the rules which combine them into sentence meanings will frequently yield several possibilities for interpretation. Having said that, the findings of several studies have concluded that a student's ability to comprehend a reading text depends on various factors including their knowledge of vocabulary, world knowledge and the implementation of certain comprehension strategies. These comprehension strategies include using their prior knowledge to understand the text, paraphrasing, etc. (Pressley, (n.d.)) Based on this, it is clear that the participants in this study have come to realize that understanding a reading text depends on several factors, so each one will have his/her own understanding of the text. In addition to what has been written so far, (92.9%) of the students, participating in this survey, agree that to comprehend well what they read, they prefer clear, to the point, and direct material.

Moreover, with regard to the second set of the questions, (yes, no), the results are as follows. A significant percentage of the respondents (71.4%) admit that unless they understand the deep meaning, they cannot have a complete comprehension of the utterance at all. What is

more, (64.3%) of the respondents believe that almost always the speaker him/herself is the only one who knows the exact meaning of the utterance he/she says. Finally, the majority of the students (92.9%) have concluded that for a complete comprehension of Pragmatic aspects, it is important to have a full exposure to the target language environment and have social contact with native speakers. This explains why some students prefer to study English abroad to get the chance to mingle with native speakers and get a better understanding of the culture and the deep meanings of utterances.

Data

1. I admit that my full understanding and comprehension of the material I read is different than that of my colleagues in the class. اقر واعترف بأن ما افهمه عن مادة ما، يختلف عما يفهمه طلبة الفصل الاخرون.

14 responses

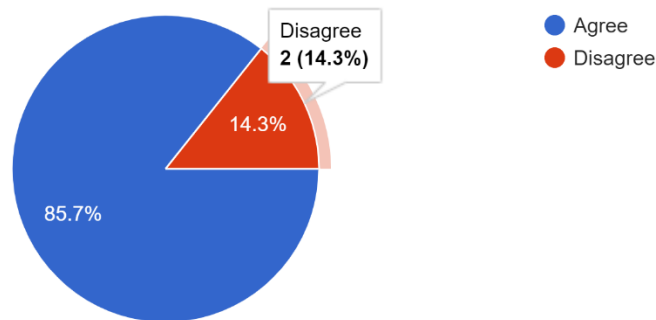


Figure 1

2. To comprehend what I read well, I prefer clear, to the point, and direct material. حتى استوعب ما أقرأ بشكل جيد، فأنني افضل ان تكون المادة المقدمة لي واضحة ومباشرة ودون لبس.

14 responses

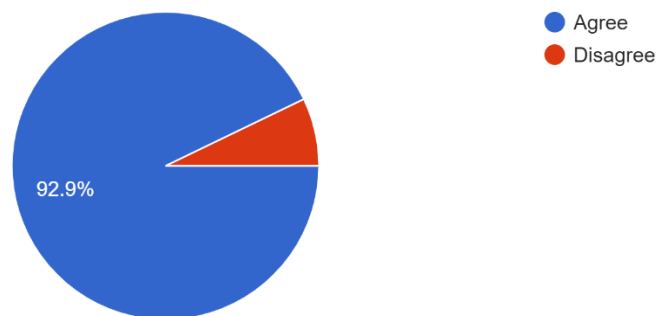


Figure 2

3. I often find it difficult to understand the deep meaning of a certain context. غالبا ما اجد صعوبة في فهم

المعنى العميق لمادة ما

14 responses

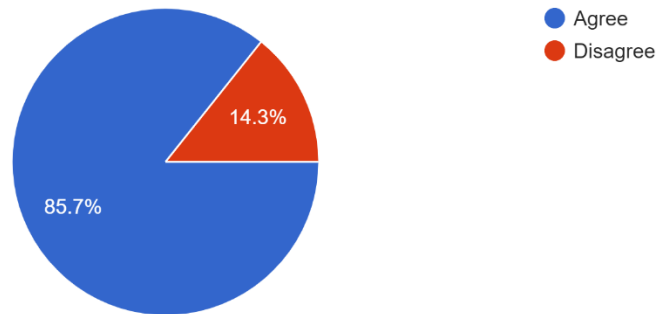


Figure 3

4. I cannot understand native speakers well when they use some new expressions. اجد صعوبة في الفهم

الكامل للمصطلحات الجديدة التي يستخدمها الناطقون بالانجليزية من اصحاب اللغة

14 responses

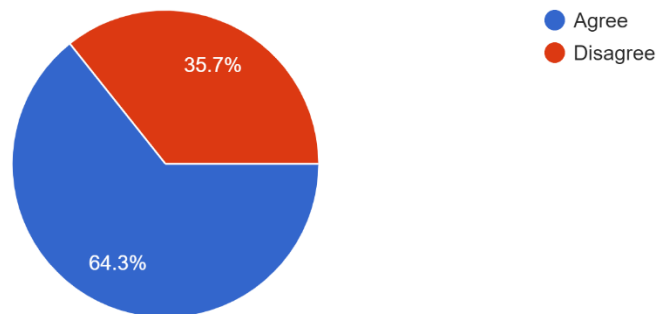


Figure 4

5. Metaphors, well sayings, personification, and irony make it often difficult for me to understand the deep meaning of an utterance. استخدام الاستعارات والمجاز في الغالب يقف حجر عثرة في استيعاب ما اواجهه من مفاهيم.
14 responses

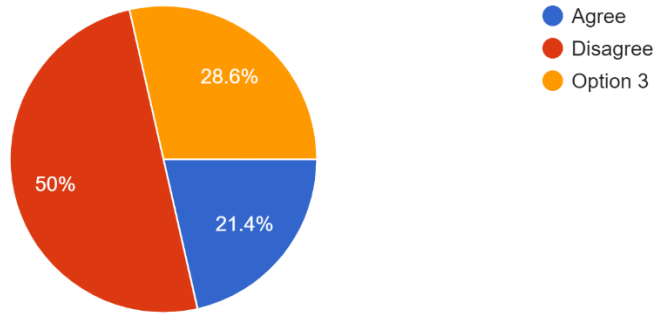


Figure 5

6. Unless I understand the deep meaning, I cannot have a complete comprehension of the utterance at all. مالم استوعب المعنى العميق للجملة، فأنني لن افهمها بشكل كامل.
14 responses

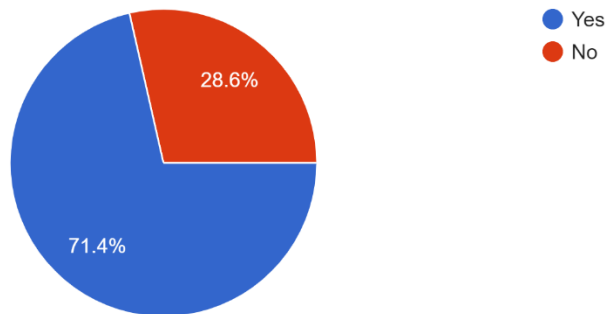


Figure 6

7. "Pragmatics" is an enjoyable linguistic element that makes me think deeply while tackling certain utterances. إن العلم الذي يقوم على سبر غور المعنى العميق للنص، لهو علم ممتع ويحفزني للبحث عن المعنى العميق.

14 responses

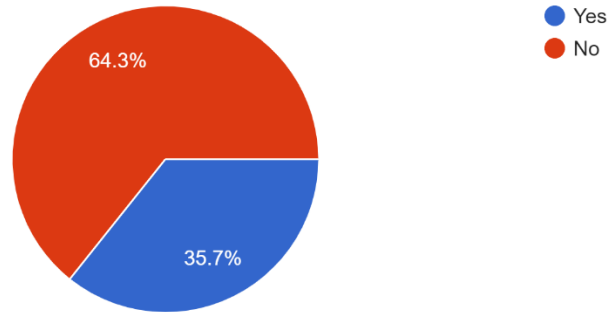


Figure 7

9. Normally, the surface meaning of utterances differs than the deep meaning and that is why the deep meaning is needed most. غالبا ما يكون المعنى الظاهري مخ...، ولهذا السبب نحن نسعى للمعنى الباطني لانه الامثل والمطلوب.

14 responses

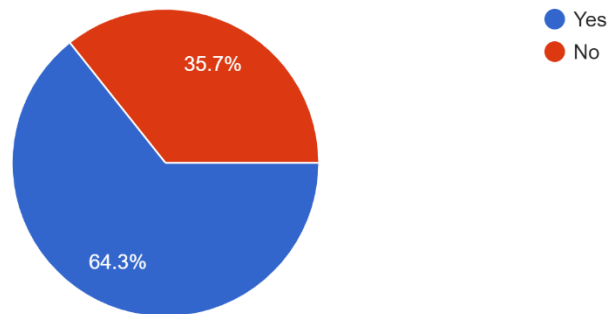


Figure 8

9. Normally, the surface meaning of utterances differs than the deep meaning and that is why the deep meaning is needed most. غالباً ما يكون المعنى الظاهري مخ...، ولهذا السبب نحن نسعى للمعنى الباطني لانه الامثل والمطلوب.
14 responses

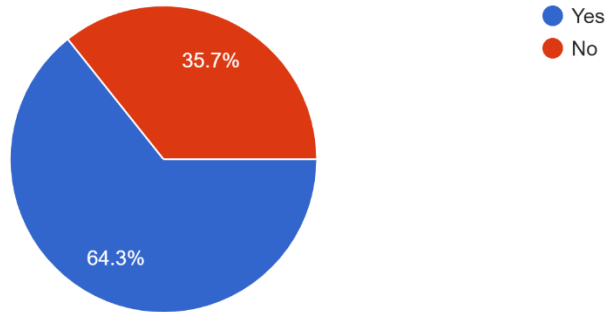


Figure 9

10. Almost always the speaker him/herself is the ONLY one who knows the exact meaning of the utterance he/she says. دائماً ما يكون المتكلم هو الاوحد الذي يعرف المعنى المراد بالضبط لما يقول من جمل ومفاهيم.
14 responses

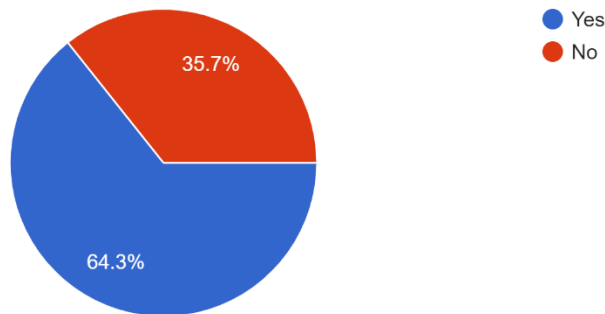


Figure 10

Recommendations

-since most classrooms are teacher-centered, teachers should encourage students to participate freely, and play vital roles in using and exploring pragmatic elements.

-teachers should urge students to think in, and use -to the maximum-the target language, so as to fully comprehend the deep meaning of utterances and the cultural background of the language they are studying.

- using and utilizing authentic examples and cases in teaching pragmatics is recommended to let students deal with real matters.

-communicating with native speakers of the target language is so beneficial in shaping students' comprehension of the societal way of using pragmatics.

-normally, teachers follow what exists in the textbook literally, which is full of rigid instructions, tough and rough material, but the smart teacher should do his best to broaden his students' horizons by providing them with additional materials to feel comfortable while using authentic examples.

-in the age of the Internet, knowledge has become easily obtained and available; teachers may initiate virtual portals and web pages, or recommend certain cites on Pragmatics for a full comprehension .

-teachers should attend or conduct, workshops or training courses on Pragmatics, and then share that with other colleagues, either in person, or via the web pages.

Conclusion

Studying Pragmatics makes teachers believe that there is another meaning which is not apparent to all audience; it is beyond the surface structure. Getting a complete picture of a certain text means a successful conveyance of the meaning to the audience. Pragmatics differs completely than semantics, as semantics deals with the surface meaning of the utterance, while pragmatics goes deeper beyond the vocabulary.

The social interaction and the surrounding environment play a very important role in understanding this field of linguistics; pragmatics.

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About the researchers

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Appendices

Questionnaire

1. I admit that my full understanding and comprehension of the material I read is different than that of my colleagues in the class.
(A) Agree (B) Disagree
2. To comprehend what I read well, I prefer clear, to the point, and direct material.
(A) Agree (B) Disagree
3. I often find it difficult to understand the deep meaning of a certain context.
(A) Agree (B) Disagree
4. I cannot understand native speakers well when they use some new expressions.
(A) Agree (B) Disagree
5. Metaphors, well sayings, personification, and irony make it often difficult for me to understand the deep meaning of an utterance.
(A) Agree (B) Disagree

Yes / No Questions

6. Unless I understand the deep meaning, I cannot have a complete comprehension of the utterance at all.
(A) Yes (B) No
7. "Pragmatics" is an enjoyable linguistic element that makes me think deeply while tackling certain utterances.
(A) Yes (B) No
8. For a complete comprehension of Pragmatic aspects, it is important to have a full exposure to the target language environment and have social contact with native speakers.
(A) Yes (B) No
9. Normally, the surface meaning of utterances differs than the deep meaning and that is why the deep meaning is needed most.
(A) Yes (B) No
10. Almost always the speaker him/herself is the ONLY one who knows the exact meaning of the utterance he/she says.
(A) Yes (B) No