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Pragmatic Insight into
Foreign Language Teaching

Reiko Hayashi

Language and Thought in Culture

The process through which a person verbalizes what he wants to speak involves a stimulative idea, the culture to which he belongs, and the language structure he uses. To speak is not just to utter sounds or words. When a person says something, he has knowledge of what he is talking about; in other words, he possesses a concept of the idea of his utterance. This concept is formed by the speaker’s stimulative idea: the idea that originates in his mind as a reaction or a response to the environment. Suppose a man wants to take a bus at the bus depot, and he does not know which bus to take. Probably he would think, “I will ask this driver whether this bus is the right one or not.” His first reaction to seeing the bus is stimulative, and this stimulative behavior is individual and is never exactly alike for everyone. On the other hand, his reaction is similar to some extent to those of other people who are in the same culture. Hoijer remarks:

Cultural anthropologists, during the last twenty-five years, have gradually moved from an atomistic definition of culture, describing it as a more or less haphazard collection of traits, to one which emphasizes pattern and configuration. Kluckhohn and Kelly perhaps best express this modern concept of culture when they define it as “all those historically created designs for living explicit and implicit, rational, irrational, and non-rational, which exist at any given time as potential guides for the behavior of men.” Traits, elements, or, better, patterns of culture in this definition are organized or structured into a system or set of systems, which, because it is historically created, is therefore open and subject to constant change. 1

Thus, a man’s spontaneous behavior is also more or less in the framework of patterned behavior, that is, culture.

The stimulative idea is not a concept. Concept is structured through the process of the ILLOCUTIONARY ACT. Hartnack explains the ILLOCUTIONARY ACT in his book as follows:

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A person who speaks, i.e., a person who says something, performs what is called an ILLOCUTIONARY ACT. The parrot does not perform any illocutionary act; it is unable to do so. It performs phonetic acts. If for instance, I use a sentence to make a promise I have performed an illocutionary act, namely the act of making a promise. Instances of other illocutionary acts will be such acts as to make a promise, to ask a question, to issue a command, to make a report, to give a description, to name, to identify, to warn, etc....

A condition for the language-user to be able to perform an illocutionary act is that he has knowledge of the act language may be used to perform.... We all possess sufficient knowledge of our ordinary concepts to perform ordinary illocutionary acts. 2

This illocutionary act is largely determined by the culture that the person belongs to. Human beings in different cultures structuralize illocutionary acts in widely different ways. To return to the above example of a man at the bus depot, a man who was born and raised in Japan would be concerned with the vehicle itself and think about whether or not the bus goes to his destination while a man who was born and raised in America might be concerned with the person who operates the vehicle and think about whether or not the driver goes to his destination. The way of expressing their illocutionary act makes sense to those who are in the same culture, as Hayakawa indicates when he says, “From the point of view of anyone interested in the operation of the human mind, the important fact is that any statement or observation of reality is an abstraction—an abstraction dictated by the convention of one's culture.” 3

In order to express an illocutionary act, people need to go through a physical process: an application of the vocabulary and rules of grammatical structure of the language they will speak. Gladstone suggests that language is a vehicle by which the other facts of the culture are shaped and communicated. He says that the vocabulary that a person uses is determined by his culture. 4

As far as the issue of language and culture is concerned, there are two camps among anthropologists and linguists. Taking the Eskimo's dozens of types of expressions for “snowing”, as an example, Whorf believes that since Eskimos have many different words for snow, they see snow differently, while Brown hold that since Eskimos have different kinds of snow, they are forced to use different kinds of words for snow in order to categorize them. 5

Sapir explains that human beings' actions such as walking and eating are organic, instinctive functions (not, of course, themselves instincts) but their speech is a noninstinctive, acquired, “cultural” function. 6 He admits that language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determine the texture of our lives. 7
Carrol and Casagrande propose that both culture and language influence the development of perceptual categories, which vindicates the Whorf Hypothesis that language does influence thought (perception) as does culture.

I conducted a contrastive analysis of the writing of Japanese students to determine how the Japanese way of thinking influences the students’ acquisition of English and also investigated how their ability to create natural English sentences and practical usages is affected by their lack of understanding of culture. In my analysis based on the Japanese cultural space, I proved that the learner’s world view as well as language transfer interferes significantly with foreign language acquisition. Here, I should like to illustrate the above review of the relations of language, thought, and culture with the following figure.

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1** RELATIONSHIPS OF LANGUAGE, THOUGHT, AND CULTURE

Importance of Pragmatics for Foreign Language Teaching

It is clear now that language and culture are closely connected. It is necessary to consider next how to teach English to foreign students in terms of the differences in culture and view of the world.

Chomsky explained in 1965 that the sentence is the basic unit of language as follows:

... the syntactic component consists of a base that generates deep structures and a transformational part that maps them into surface structures. The deep structure of a sentence is submitted to the semantic component for semantic interpretation, and its surface
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structure enters the phonological component and undergoes phonetic interpretation. The
final effect of a grammar, then, is to relate a semantic interpretation to a phonetic
representation— that is, to state how a sentence is interpreted. This relation is mediated
by the syntactic component of the grammar, which constitutes its sole "creative" part. 10

The current tendency in viewing grammar is to consider grammar as a mediating
process connecting conceptual data and its phonetic representation. Thus, language
plays an important role in communication. 11 It would seem to follow, however,
that the Chomskian assertion that language is a self-contained system separate
from the actual use of language is insufficient in studying the language in its actual
use.

An individual sentence does not have any meaning if it is investigated in
isolation. Human beings utter sentences in sequence, by means of which the
communicative message can be conveyed; that is, human communication is possible
only within the context of a group of sentences. Hence, in order to maintain
successful communication, it is necessary to study not only a sentence per se but
also the units of and the relations between sentences. In this sense, neither
phonological nor syntactic study alone would be successful in terms of studying
communication. Chomsky says:

There is no reason why one should not also study the interaction of several factors
involved in complex mental acts and underlying actual performance, but such a study is not
likely to proceed very far unless the separate factors are themselves fairly well understood. 12

and he claims that linguistics is simply the subfield of psychology that deals with
these aspects of the mind and holds that the analysis of the meaning in terms of
the speaker's mind should be from the underlying deep structure. He asserts:

... a system of propositions expressing the meaning of a sentence is produced in the
mind as the sentence is realized as a physical signal, the two being related by certain
formal operations that, in current terminology, we may call grammatical transformations... we can thus distinguish the surface structure of the sentence, the organization into
categories and phrases that is directly associated with the physical signal, from the underlying
depth structure, also a system of categories and phrases, but with a more abstract character. 13

However, Chomsky's proposition concerning the relationship between the underlying
depth structure of a sentence and the mind does not solve the crucial problem of
"communication." Chomsky explains his view with the example of the sentence "A
wise man is honest." He says that the sentence, "a man is wise" and "a man is
honest" are understood as "a wise man is honest" in underlying structure. 14

However, "a wise man is honest" has a different meaning from the combined
sentence of "a man is wise" and "a man is honest." Therefore, the exact meaning implied in "a wise man is honest" would not be understood unless the situational setting of this sentence is explained. In other words, the situational context in which the speaker came to utter "a wise man is honest" defines the deep meaning of this sentence.

The analysis of an individual sentence out of context would not suffice to reach an understanding of the underlying truth. Present phonological and syntactical analysis deals only with single sentences. Herein the pitfall of linguistic analysis lies. In order to make up for this deficiency, "extralinguistic" analysis, in other words, "extralinguistic" study should be required, which includes pragmatics based on context. Stalnaker defines the notion of pragmatics as follows:

> Pragmatics is the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed. There are two major types of problems to be solved within pragmatics: first, to define interesting types of speech acts and speech products; second, to characterize the features of the speech context which help determine which proposition is expressed by a given sentence. The analysis of illocutionary acts is an example of a problem of the first kind; the study of indexical expressions is an example of the second. 16

Needless to say, the Chomskian type of grammatical analysis is important for a better understanding of the meaning of words, sentences, and languages, and a phonological, syntactical, and semantic approach is inevitable in language teaching and learning. As far as "communicative sense" is concerned, language investigation should involve a number of elements including psychological conditions in a certain situation wherein the speaker happens to make his utterance.

As seen in a child’s language acquisition, language learning is a cognitive process. Children seem to imitate the parents, but actually they do not. They encode their meaning with the syntactical and phonological system of a language, make their utterance, and then decode the response as if they were imitating the sound system. Children form the thinking habits as they learn to think in a certain language. Chomsky explains:

> Direct description of the child’s actual verbal output is no more likely to provide an account of the real underlying competence in the case of child language than in the case of adult language, ability to multiply, or any other nontrivial rule-governed behavior. 17

The procedures by which adults acquire new words and those by which children do so are different processes of cognition. Frost asserts that the child has accumulated certain raw materials—percepts, images, memories, and concepts—that he manipulates during thinking. These raw materials are influenced by emotions,
needs, attitudes, and habits.

In early stage of the development of the innate stimulative idea that leads to an illocutionary act, the speaker's readiness for the linguistic construction is affected by cultural and social variables. Keessing says:

If the human infant can learn his culture, it is probably because he is already programmed in some detail as a theory-builder and culture-organizer. The underlying cognitive processes and structures are likely to be more similar than the diverse surface forms in different cultures. 18

Hence, it is natural that adult foreign language leaners have already formed their thinking habits in their native language by the time they begin to learn a foreign language. When EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students learn a new word of a new sentence separately from the context, they incorrectly formulate it within their own perception, which is in some way different from that of native speakers.

As Richards notes in his article on typical intralingual and developmental errors, 19 the most common intralingual error referred to by linguists is at the syntactic level. However, EFL students often produce strange sentences, which may be correct in some contexts but which seem wrong in the contexts in which they are used, and which would sound strange to the native speakers of English even though their meaning would be understood. The cause of this sort of error would be neither on the native language nor on the second language level, as we usually think of these levels.

Ross also reports that, in an error analysis, one of her students from Afghanistan found that out of 200 errors, 150 or 68.4 % of the total seemed to result from failure to observe the distinctions in English grammar—that is, failure to use the appropriate grammatical structure to express the intended meaning in a particular context. This student felt that 46 % of these 150 form-meaning-association errors stemmed from the fact that the meaning distinctions were not observed in the same way in the grammar of their native language, Dari. Therefore, although the Dari speakers had been taught the English grammatical forms and what they meant, they were thinking in terms of meaning distinctions marked by the grammar of their own language. 20

The reason the EFL students produce strange sentences is that they reproduce Japanese grammar with the underlying grammar in their minds and borrow the English grammar, which seems equivalent to the reproduced Japanese grammar, as illustrated in figure 2.
Figure 2 PERCEPTION AND UTTERANCE

J. B. Carroll states that whenever an individual who has already learned one linguistic system to a high degree of competence attempts to learn another new linguistic system, problems of facilitation and interference arise and that in the psychology of learning facilitation and interference phenomena are considered under the generic concept of transfer—transfer of learning or transfer of training. Thus, according to Carroll, the transfer problems at the cognitive level are exemplified by difficulties in selecting both appropriate lexical items and appropriate syntactical structures. The real problem then is how the selection of appropriate words and structures should be taught. In order to do so, that is, to learn how to select appropriate words and structures, mastering only the skill of content coding operations is not enough. How to acquire the relationship messages is more important. In other words, language should be taught not only at the phonetic, morphemic and syntactic levels, but also at the semantic and pragmatic level, which deals with the learner's cognition. When we teach English, the interrelationships between linguistic units, speakers, and extralinguistic information should be taken into consideration.

Application of Pragmatics in Language Teaching

First I would like to describe "cultural grammar" briefly. The notion of cultural grammar was presented by Goodenough in 1957. Such a grammar would provide a structural description of a particular cultural code and would be an appropriate guide to the understanding of the world of the people of that culture. The familiar linguistic grammar is a structural description of a linguistic code and is at most the structural interpretation of each sentence. Cultural grammar teaches the "culture rules" that are connected on a basic level with specific appropriate messages and social behavior. In a statement quoted by Keesing, Frake compared the two grammars:

... a strategy of ethnographic description that gives a central place to the cognitive processes of the actors involved... will give us productive descriptions... which, like the
linguist's grammar, succinctly state that one must know in order to generate culturally acceptable acts and utterances appropriate to a given socioecological context. 23

No scholarly cultural grammar has as yet been published, nor has a scholastic discipline that might produce one become generally accepted. However, Keesing says that there are encouraging signs of a convergence of interest between cognitive anthropologists and linguists and lists Fillmore, George and Robin Lakoff, and Langendoen as among those now concerned with this study. 24

“Cultural competence” and “linguistic competence” cannot be taught separately. We have to teach students how to speak and how to understand sentences. “Do you want to take the paper to Mr. Smith?” is sometimes an order and sometimes a question. Keesing says:

What about the linguists? Can they wisely continue to focus on linguistic competence? As we have seen, a line once drawn around competence has had to be moved outward. Language will, I think, reveal internal complexities that demand continual broadening. The phenomena of psycholinguistics (especially language acquisition), of linguistic change, and of sociolinguistics are pushing us toward a further move outward into the realm of “performance” and the messiness of the real world of communications. 25

Pragmatics may be a combination of what Keesing calls a new linguistics and a new ethnoscience, which solves the problem of interpretation of sentences from their contexts and situations. Ethnoscience can contribute a great deal to the pragmatic study of language through the study of cultural behavior and the inference of a system of knowledge underlying this behavior.

Oller suggests two theoretical approaches to the construction of materials, which are, namely, the syntactic approach and the pragmatic approach. He also proposes an inductive method, explaining that learning itself is defined as the operation of induction and substitution to generate a grammar of expectance. 26

Now I would like to explain Oller's approaches briefly and give my own view on them.

In the syntactic approach the sentences are based on syntactic principles:
1. select sentences which are derived from the pragmatic contexts,
2. make pattern drills for these sentences that look a lot like the familiar pattern drills, and
3. contrive the contexts with the sentences selected in 1.
In the pragmatic approach, the sentences are arranged according to the realistic lifelike contexts, following these steps:
1. produce natural contexts like the episodes in an American soap opera,
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2. select sentences in the contexts, and
3. contrive pattern drills for these sentences.

Because he feels contextualization is important, Oller argues that the learner who follows the syntactic approach will benefit less from the effects of transfer and will suffer more from the effects interference while the learner who follows the pragmatic approach will benefit more from transfer and suffer less from interference. One consequence of the pragmatic approach, he says, is that the learner will come to possess a "grammar of expectance" that will enable him to predict a great deal of information from the words and sentences. He also presents evidence that even the pattern drills in the pragmatic approach are less affected by interference than are those used with the syntactic approach because the former are thoroughly contextualized, and the latter are only partially so. 27

I believe that students' progress in acquiring English would be greatest if these approaches were used in parallel. However, even though Oller cites empirical evidence that supports his prediction, it is fairly difficult to put these approaches into the practice. The methods of doing so should be considered.

In order to teach the basic syntactic and phonological grammar, Oller's syntactic approach is important. In this approach, the students will learn the syntax of the sentences although it may be somewhat artificial from the point of view of actual use. For example, the designer of the materials may select several passive forms from pragmatic contexts and make several pattern drills for each sentence. With these pattern drills, he will contrive a simple dialogue that is also visually presented so that the students can take roles in the dialogue and participate in a conversation to help master the syntactic usage of the passive form.

This practice is common in foreign-language teaching. The pragmatic approach is unique. Pragmatic materials are long realistic stories that provide a series of lessons. The story in pragmatic context is presented audiovisually over a period of up to a week while the syntactic context and pattern drills and the pragmatic pattern drills change in every lesson. Therefore, in each lesson the teacher will tell the students which sentences they should pay attention to. For example, when the teacher teaches passive forms, he might enlist the students' interest saying, "Watch the movie carefully, paying attention to the passive forms." He might ask them to write down the passive sentences they heard. Pragmatic pattern drills are uniquely different from syntactic ones and are designed on the basis of ethnoscience. These drills are completely controlled by the situation. Each pattern sentence is woven into the situation so that the teacher can explain when, where, and in what psychological condition the students are to use each sentence. The students are able to associate the language and its "innate" idea with reality through these
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pragmatic pattern drills. In this drill, I would like to strongly advocate a method of teaching based on an ethnoscientific comparison of the target language and the native language. As Oller indicates:

In order for interference to occur, similar objects which are to be processed must be in or near the focus of attention at the same time or nearly the same time. It is necessary to add the stipulation that the similarities of the objects in question must be those which are used for storage in memory and attention. 28

With the pragmatic approach, the teacher may be able to teach the “overt” linguistic and cultural form by defining what sentence is correct in what situation, but with the ethnoscientific approach, he can teach the “covert” linguistic and cultural form that supplements the explanation of the pragmatic approach—for example, the teacher may explain the psychological condition of the speaker. The designer of the materials and teacher are required to make clear the crucial subtle differences in meaning between the native and the target languages. Therefore, the pattern sentences are contrived in accordance with a comparison between Japanese and English, and the syntactically ordered sets of sentences and those ordered on a pragmatic basis are not identical. For example,

“I was admitted to the University of Tokyo,”
“Congratulations! When did you take the exam?”
“Last month. And I was notified by telegram today.”

“Hello, George. I haven’t seen you for a few days. Where have you been?”
“Oh, I’ve been to Tokyo on business. I had bad luck on the way.”
“What happened? Did you go by train?”
“No, I went by turnpike. I thought it was faster, but I met with an accident and was held up for three hours!”

I would like to illustrate the above explanation as follows:

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{(syntactic approach)} & \text{(pragmatic approach)} & \text{(ethnoscientific approach)} \\
A1 & B1 & C1 \\
\text{Sentences from the pragmatic context} & \text{Pattern drills with the sentences} & \text{Dialogue based on the pattern drill} \\
A2 & B2 & C2 \\
\text{Pragmatic contexts drama a set of series} & \text{Selection of sentences from the contexts} & \text{Pattern drills with the sentences} \\
A3 & B3 & C3 \\
\text{Explanation of the pragmatic contexts} & \text{Selection of sentences from the ethnoscientific point of view} & \text{Pattern drills from the ethnoscientific point of view} \\
\end{array}
\]

Figure 3  TEACHING APPROACH

Source: John W. Oller, Jr., "Induction, Mind, and Contextualization of Materials to Be Learned," p. 25.
Ideally there will be two teachers in each class: one a native speaker of English and the other a Japanese teacher. The Japanese English teacher would mainly take charge of B1 and C1 while the native speaker of English would deal with A2 and C2. Both teachers would teach A3 and C3. In A3 and C3 the native teacher would explain the usage of the patterns in a situation, and the Japanese teacher would supplement his explanation to help with internalization. However, a well-prepared, skillful Japanese teacher can teach the class with the help of audiovisual aids when there is no native speaker of English.

This pragmatic and ethnoscientific approach and method of teaching English as a foreign language would seem to be necessary as a basis for the production of really effective teaching materials because no other approach or method seems to take into consideration all of the parts of the communication process.

NOTES


7 Ibid.


“Difference of perception of Japanese and English Speaking People”, Eibungaku Ronshu,
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Kansai University, 1977.


13 Ibid., pp. 28–29.

14 Ibid., 29–30.

15 Oller, op. cit., pp. 39–40. Oller explains this notion nicely with additional examples.


24 Ibid., p. 322.

25 Ibid., p. 326.


27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., p. 21.

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Miscellaneous Material