

Pragmatic Meaning and EFL Learners' Text-understanding Ability

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Abstract

Reading comprehension occupies a very vital position as one of the skills in learning English as a foreign language. The ability to comprehend any reading text requires interpreting text through making accurate connection between the linguistic representations or meaning of words and sentences and their pragmatic outcomes. Thus, one of the challenging burdens of EFL learners is to capture the intended meaning of any reading text. This paper aims at introducing the significance of pragmatic meaning in reading L2 texts as an alternative to foster EFL learners' text-understanding ability. In this regard, the researchers employed 40 students in the field of ELT to read two kinds of texts; namely semantically-oriented and pragmatically-oriented texts and answer the related questions. Findings of the study indicated that the majority of students were capable of answering the questions in simplified texts due to their familiarity with the passage when processing the reading material and the ease of the passage. However, only a small number of students was successful in answering the questions of original passages. Based on the results of the study, some guidelines are suggested to make students familiar with pragmatic meaning. In addition, this research enables the students (particularly less-gifted ones) to attend to pragmatic meaning in text-understanding, which in fact helps them to overcome the problem of text-understanding to a considerable extent.

Keywords: Linguistically-oriented texts (in this study are called simplified passages), Pragmatically-oriented texts (in this study are called original passages), Reading texts, Pragmatic meaning, Semantic meaning

1. Introduction

The causes of failure of foreign language learners in reading L2 texts with comprehension has been investigated continuously by different experts and this problem has created some misunderstanding among theorists. It is also clear that this is a great source of anxiety for L2 learners themselves. Sometimes even ingenious students are unable to understand texts and can not interpret them in spite of having rich vocabulary and enough skill in deriving the meanings of individual words and expressions.

Various viewpoints about the factors causing in comprehending reading passages have been presented. Some theorists such as Alderson (1984) believes that one of the justifications for L2 readers' failure is employing incorrect and inappropriate strategies in reading that text in that language. Another important reason is that some EFL students haven't received enough grammatical competence in foreign language. Bowen, (1985, p. 245) refers to the analysis of syntax, "if the syntax of selected texts are analysed, students especially at intermediate level will be encouraged to learn complex patterns, principles of cohesion and meaning in general". Bowen also indicates that one of the student's failures in reading comprehension is looking up the meaning of every word in the passage in a dictionary and finally losing the general meaning and central idea of the passage during reading. These students who are indeed considered poor readers cannot understand the passage except for the limited number of words which donot play any crucial role in text or passage comprehension.

It must also be remembered that in most EFL classes the dominant focus in teaching reading comprehension has been on introducing new vocabulary or the ways for mastering grammatical points in order to get the meaning of a reading text. However it appeared that this teaching methodology has not been adequate in leading EFL learners to

get the real and communicative meaning of the texts. In an attempt to enhance learners' reading comprehension ability, Soonthornmanee (2002) implemented a reciprocal teaching method with a group of 42 students where as the other 42 learners were taught through skill-oriented instruction. Based on the findings, the author concluded that reciprocal teaching method was very effective in bolstering EFL learners' comprehension-monitoring and comprehension fostering skills. Using Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) by Fan (2010) was another step to develop EFL learners' reading comprehension abilities. Fan (2010) found that strategic reading competence of Taiwanese university students were positively affected by CSR.

Apart from the factors introduced and investigated in the studies mentioned above, some experiments and research done by linguists such as Halliday (1985) Coulthard (1985) Hatch (1992) Finch (2000) & Griffiths (2006) show that the analysis of language is not only carried out at word and sentence levels but in larger units such as conversation and paragraph. Any text may contain two kinds of meaning; semantic meaning and pragmatic meaning. (See Leech 1983; Levinson 1983; Brown 2001; Schmit 2002; Carter and Nunan 2001; Van Valin 2008). The former is, in fact, linguistic meaning, namely the surface meaning of the words and sentences with direct relationship between their forms and linguistic meaning. The latter is functional meaning or intended meaning, the function which a sentence performs in a discourse, and there is no direct link between their forms and functions or "what words mean (semantics), and the use speakers make of words (pragmatics)" (King and Stanley, 2005:111). Apparently, the understanding of pragmatic meaning is more difficult than the understanding of linguistic meaning. Therefore, it can be considered another important factor in text understanding.

2. Research Objectives

Given the fact that the relationship between mastery of pragmatic knowledge and EFL students' text-understanding ability is one of a whole host domains in need of inquiry this research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does pragmatic meaning affect student's degree of passage understanding?
2. To What extent does linguistic meaning facilitate and create barrier in student's understanding of passages?"

This study was designed to suggest some solutions which can reduce students' problems of text understanding. It tried to present ways for recognizing indirectly stated sentences in any text. The findings can help both learners and teachers to realize the weak points and try to eradicate them.

3. Methodology

3.1 Instruments

It was decided that the best instrument or material to adopt for this investigation was reading texts. The texts in this study have been taken from 'Intermediate comprehension passages' by Donne (1970). Ten passages were selected at almost the same level of difficulty and the same style of writing. The passages were given in two forms: first the linguistically-oriented texts which are called simplified passages in this study because of some changes made in sentences. The second forms are pragmatically-oriented texts, which are called original passages and in which some sentences were stated indirectly. In simplified passages these sentences are omitted and they are written in simple forms. Because the simplified versions of the selected passages were not available, they were prepared by the researchers themselves, who followed the fashion set by the experts in the field. The ease and complexity of the passages were not so important as the main goal was to evaluate students' ability to comprehend unadapted L2 texts, especially to understand some indirectly stated sentences.

3.2 Participants

A group of forty students in their first year at Maragheh Azad university in ELT, aged 20 – 24 (both girls and boys) participated in this experiment. They were selected according to their level of English knowledge. The participants were almost at the same level of language proficiency determined by some class examinations, such as answering some true–false, multiple–choice, and comprehension questions from English reading texts. Each test consisted of twenty questions. Any student who answered correctly sixteen questions out of twenty was chosen, and altogether they were 40 students. Test preparation and scoring processes were conducted by the researchers.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

40 subjects were asked to read ten original passages silently one by one to comprehend the content. Afterwards, they were asked to give answers to comprehension questions in the spaces provided for each passage. It is necessary to say the examination was conducted in a serious way to make the experimental situation more realistic. The reason was to make the students believe that these exams had not been designed for personal research. The reading time was recorded. After an interval of 15 minutes following the reading period, the subjects were given another original

text. Of course, the time allocation was enough and suitable for reading each original passage. Again after 15 minutes they were given another passage. This procedure was repeated until the end of ten texts. After finishing all the original texts and answering questions, the students were given ten simplified passages, like the original passages, and they were asked to read the passages and answer the related comprehension questions and after a certain period of time they were given another passage. This procedure was adopted in order to ensure that no time would be wasted or no student would have the opportunity to reflect over the questions.

During the examination no question was answered concerning the meaning of sentences and words. At first, the students felt that the passages were the same but later they recognized that they differed in the level and style. The subjects delivered their simplified papers in a shorter time than before, since the second versions of the passages were simplified. Then the subjects were asked to answer the questions with reference to the simplified text and to give reasons for their answers. The aim of this task was to find out how well students had identified the similarities and differences between the two types of texts. For each subject the number of answers which he/she had given to these comprehension questions was scored. It should be noted that the number of questions was limited for two reasons, first, it was rather impossible to provide several pragmatically-oriented sentences to be asked as questions and this was because indirectly stated sentences were not so many in each passage. Second, considering the students' mental comfort was important as well. As such, if the passages and questions were more than this number and in one session, the students would be confused, thus the results wouldn't be reliable. With this in mind, the questions were designed on the basis of sentence comprehension to avoid answering the questions by chance. Necessary to mention that of 10 passages only 2 were presented in this paper.

4. Findings and Discussion

The questions like "How does pragmatic meaning affect student's degree of passage understanding?" and "To What extent does linguistic meaning facilitate and create barrier in student's understanding of passages?" are addressed and compared in figures 1 and 2 utilizing the classification method of analysis.

Generally, the overall result clearly tends to support the hypothesis that students are not so familiar with pragmatic meaning of sentences and this is an important reason for failure of students to understand the text. The results showed that the majority of students are capable of answering the questions in simplified texts. This is due to the students' familiarity with the passage when processing the reading material and the ease of the passage, their ability in identifying the meaning of vocabularies through base form, affixes and, finally the lack of any difficult words in the passage. As the figures show only a small number of students were successful in answering the questions on original passages, and the result of this section was the basic part of the present hypothesis. It may be assumed that an increase in the number of correct answers to the original question leads to better pragmatic knowledge integrated with semantic or linguistic knowledge. Some students have the ability to infer from context and this can be the second reason for their success. The identification of structure of the passage is another factor. It is clear that any piece of information passes several stages before human mind perceives it. According to Samuels (1988) and Carter and Nunan (2001) in reading, it takes a short time for each word to be processed from its written to its practical and receptive form in the mind. This is called "information processing".

What is important and relevant is a kind of information processing which is known as pragmatic information processing. It could be supposed that those students who have a high rate or degree of correct answers in original or pragmatic text have enough proficiency in that kind of knowledge which is processed contextually.

From the final interpretation of the results we can observe a fact about the third group of students. They have considerable weakness in reading comprehension and are unfamiliar with the vocabulary. They have been unable in answering the questions on both kinds of texts in spite of average scores in several class examinations. However, another point is remarkable with respect to the results shown in figures; that is, the increase and decrease in the number of answers from original to simplified passages and in some cases from one original text to another. This can be due to the depth or the implicity of meaning in passages; in fact, the distance from surface linguistic forms to underlying social meaning.

Of 10 passages there were some which were easier to understand than the others. The reason is that in such passages the degree of indirection or pragmatically-oriented utterances are less than the other passages. In fact these passages were almost written in their referential forms without including too much social meaning.

It is concluded that when students are confronted with some kind of text which are linguistically-oriented, that is when the meaning of individual words and sentences is easy to understand and without any remarkable ambiguity, they are less confused than when they are given a text which requires the study of context or when the text requires the students to derive the writer's intention from the written forms. Then this would be a barrier in student's understanding the text.

6. Pedagogical Implication

Regarding the presented results, the present study calls for the necessity of studying some other issues involved in comprehending English texts, for instance, the importance of difference between passages in terms of level of comprehensibility of the passages which can be investigated in future research. However, some practical guidelines are suggested (for the teachers to use) in order to decrease the problems of reading and to improve students' comprehension ability.

1. Language teachers can provide the students with some texts in which there are some pragmatically-oriented sentences; for instance, they can ask students some questions to help them guess and infer the answer, especially questions about those parts of the paragraphs which are difficult to understand or they can paraphrase the same paragraphs. One possible means is introducing students original short stories, novels, plays which represent a great deal of verbal interactions.
2. Teachers can sometimes encourage students to avoid looking up any unknown word in the passage in a dictionary and try to figure out the meaning by contextual clues.
3. Teachers can spend some time in class to explain the structure of reading passages and to make students familiar with linguistic, particularly pragmatic meaning and the significance of this meaning in text – understanding.
4. In addition, teachers can encourage students to develop pragmatic knowledge by having them concentrate on the text and pay special attention to the context in which sentences occur.
5. Teachers can help the students to avoid word memorization since one word may have different meanings in various contexts.

7. Limitations of the Study

In doing any research, the researcher should have access to required sources and tools for his/her research. Clearly some of these sources are very crucial at the start and some are supplementary which is why it was not possible to investigate the relationship between pragmatic knowledge and text-understanding ability further in this regard. Apart from the shortage of books and sources, another significant problem was that some complete texts and passages in two forms, namely, simplified and original forms which were a prerequisite for the research were absent. So, some modifications in original passages were made to compensate for the deficiency of needed passages.

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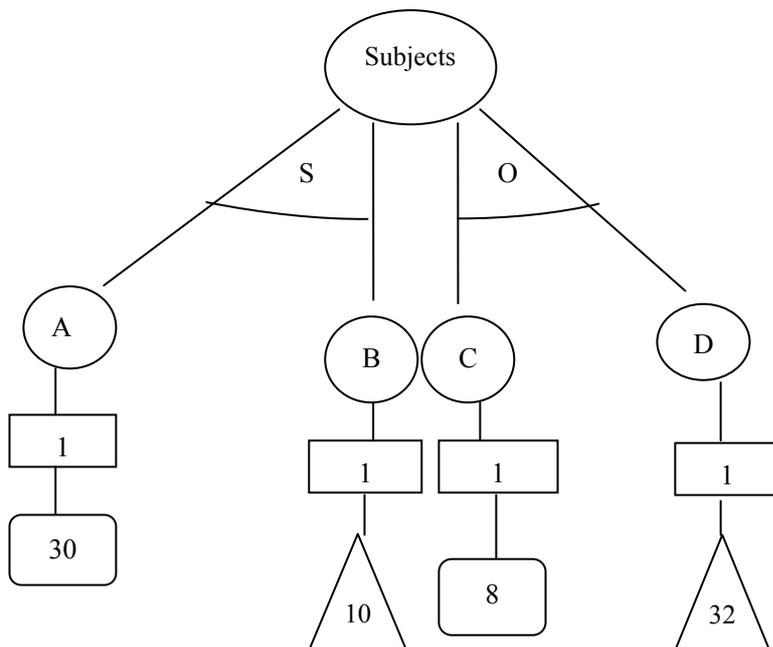


Figure 1. Results of passage 1 in two forms: simplified and original

- A** : Students who have answered the questions on simplified version correctly .
- B** : Students who have answered the same question (in A) incorrectly.
- C** : Students who have provided correct answers to the question on original passages.
- D** : Students who have answered the questions (in C) incorrectly .
- O** : Original passages
- S** : Simplified passages

The number of correct answers

The number of incorrect answers

The number of passage and questions in the passage

Figure 1 shows that the number of students who were successful in providing correct answers to the questions of simplified versions was 55% more than those answered exactly the same questions in original passages. Similarly, the number of incorrect answers to the questions of original and simplified versions proved the same result . It means that the number of incorrect answers to original or pragmatically stated passage is 55% more than that of simplified passage.

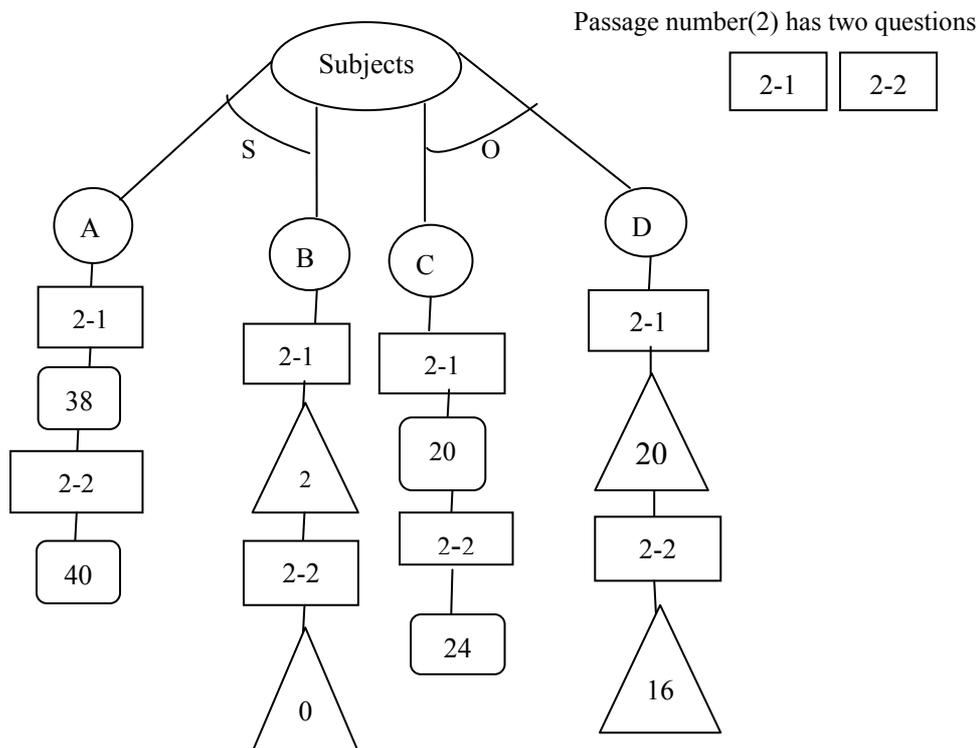


Figure 2. Results of two questions of passage 2 in two forms

Figure 2 shows that passage 2 consists of two questions in two forms, one in simple text and the other in original form. According to the figure, 38 students out of 40 answered the first question on simplified version. The figure shows correlation between correct and answers in the first incorrect question on the original passage. In the second question only 24 out of 40 subjects answered the question correctly.

Appendix

The Reading Passages Including Simplified and Original passages

In this study the passages marked (a) are the examples of original versions and those marked (b) are examples of simplified version.

Passage 1(a)

There were about twenty people in the reference library. Phillip walked around the room almost on tiptoe, afraid of disturbing the industrious readers with his heavy shoes. The shelves were filled with dictionaries, encyclopedias, atlases, biographies and other works of reference. Then he came to the section on photography. The books in this shelf were on a high self. So, he had to fetch a small ladder to get one down but as he was climbing down the ladder, the book slipped from his hand and fell to the floor. The assistant came and said severely, "you must be more careful when you are handling these books". "by the way, how old are you?" She asked Phillip, "Thirteen", he told her. "Didn't you see the notice on the door?" She asked. Phillip shook his head. Finally, he left there without any book.

Question:

What was the notice on the door? What do you think?

Passage 1(b)

There were about twenty people in the reference library. They were studying. Phillip walked around the room almost on tiptoe in order not to annoy people. The shelves were filled with dictionaries, encyclopedias, atlases, biographies and other works of reference. Then he came to the section on photography. The books in this shelf were on a high self. So, he had to bring a small ladder to get one book down. But as he was climbing down the ladder, the book slipped from his hand and fell to the floor. The assistant came and said angrily, "you must be more

careful about books; “by the way, how old are you?” She asked Phillip, “Thirteen”, he told her. “*You are not allowed in here under the age of fourteen, the assistant said. “Didn’t you see the notice on the door?”*”

Question:

What was the notice on the door?

Passage 2(a)

It was the first time Tom was going to journey alone. He had heard a great deal about underground railway in London from his friends. When he was on the platform, he heard the terrifying roar of the train and he was swept forward on to the train by the rush of people from behind. The doors closed and the train moved off. He was unable to read the names of the stations where the train stopped but he counted the number of stops. In sixth station, Tom got off but he saw the station that he had never heard of. Tom explained it to one man there. *He told Tom that he had travelled on a train going in the wrong direction.*

Questions:

1. Why was Tom unable to read the names of the stations?
2. Was the train going in the wrong direction?

Passage 2(b)

Tom was going to journey alone. He had heard much about underground railway in London. So, he was going to see there. When he was on the platform, he heard the loud sound of the train and he was thrown forward on to the train by people from behind. The doors closed and the train moved off. He couldn’t read the names of the stations where the train stopped but he counted the number of stops. In sixth station, Tom got off but he saw the station that he had never heard of. Tom explained it to a man standing there. He told Tom that he had got on the wrong train. *This train was going to another place.*

Questions:

1. Why was Tom unable to read the names of the stations?
2. Was the train going in the wrong direction?