

## **Towards an Alternative Form of Teaching Pragmatics: Cues to Unfold the Untold. TEFL and Cognitive Niche Considerations**

**Nacif Labeled**

University Mentouri Bros. Constantine, Algeria

### Abstract

Although the background of this paper comes from several disciplines as pragmatics, vocabulary and diction, and other related theoretical pedagogic perspectives, my personal alignment is cognitive. What I share with cognition and cognitivists is that what one can do with words is manifold. Besides, with an industriously built schemata (Widdowson.2007), one can through a dynamic process, adapt to any particular contexts, understand and interpret, and ultimately become an inhabitant of a psychological niche (Pinker. 2010). Accordingly, the purport is that cues as particular grammatical constructions, punctuation marks, or any others can aid the foreign language learners in considering the underlying pragmatic force of any text they read. The experiment conducted with 35 FL (Foreign language)students at the University of Constantine has allowed us to shed some light on how to enhance in learners the aptitudes to sharpen their cognitive buoyancy while making the language they are learning their own. Such a trial-and-error empirical test has evenly given us to add another voice in the teaching of English as a foreign language and pragmatics within the general framework of a cognitive niche.

**Key words:** cognitive niche, learning, pragmatics, psychology, teaching

## Introduction

Studies have been conducted in understanding the issues of vocabulary set-ups and how they are organized. The vocabulary items as verbs, personal pronouns, modals, and others are distributed according to the semantic and pragmatic realities of the language. In a conversation, for example, in adjacency pairs, the utterance produced by different speakers where the ‘utterance of the first part immediately creates an expectation of the utterance of a second part of the same pair’ (Yule, 1996, p.77). Similarly, on the other side of the acoustic exchanges, we try as listeners to understand what the speaker intends to tell us. In other words, a conversation is a cooperative action, inferring meaning in a talk exchange is essential for a successful communication, and a possible description of communication can be seen in the inferences of intentions. In fact, in a language the “encoded meanings are semantic meanings [that]serve a pragmatic purpose.” (Widdowson, 2007, p.8).

## The Foreign Language Learner and the Cognitive Niche

In biology a niche (the word was first coined by Tooby and DeVore, 1987) means the role an organism occupies in an ecosystem. In psychology, however, a niche is a loose extension of such a concept, it is a “is a lifestyle of using both thought and social cooperation to manipulate the environment. This involves, for example, using tools(...)and all the stratagems of cooperative hunting: planning, communicating, making traps, and so forth (Pinker, 2010).

In other words, the cognitive language manipulator acts deliberately towards achieving a particular aims he sets himself to attain. A language user, namely the FL learners should have the cognitive guts to manipulate the words of vocabulary, grammar, tenses and prepositions to shape a particular message that is clear enough to be understood –not ambiguous- but remains within the framework of a general standard without which communication is expected to collapse or to shut down (Grice, 1975). To Pinker (2007), language provides a window into human nature, and that “analyzing language can reveal what people are thinking and feeling.” (p, 293), or analyzes the insofar it conveys a message, and helps to negotiate the speaker-audience social relationship. In fact, if while using language our learners manipulate the environment around them, then they inhabit a cognitive niche, as we will see further down.

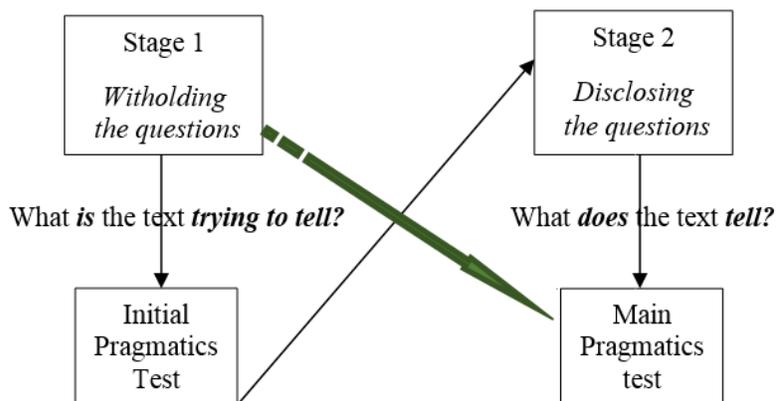
Furthermore, in manipulating language, speakers manipulate grammar. A grammar is a set of many rules and subsystem, as syntax. The latter is a combination of words into phrases and meaningful sentences into the most known linear order. Such an order allows us to understand, for example, “Yes, Daddy I have” from “Yes Daddy I asked her and she refused. Yet, more important than the clear linear order is constituency (Pinker, 2003) as a sentence can have convey different propositions consisting of ideas embedded inside ideas. A simple demonstration is an incomplete question put by a father in asking his little girl about ice cream.

To see further into such a ‘judicious (?) syntactic and pragmatic confrontations about “the mystery of human nature by examining how we use words”’, we conducted an experiment. The aim of the experiment is to try to see how much our learners can dig deep to unfold what has possibly not been told. The other aim of the experiment is to let our FL learners understand how language is constructed and spoken out to achieve social purposes.

## Design and Objectives of the Study

This small-scale research was conducted to probe into the learners' reactions vis-à-vis a text that looks flat and constructed with no true visible manipulation of words, grammar or structure. To this end, we conducted an empirical study with a two-stage classroom activity design. Learner-oriented in essence, classroom activities are primarily set for the aim to maximize students' performance by using the learner as "a resource (...) to get content from the learner; the teacher remains the language expert" (Frendo, 2009, p.50. Original italics).

The two-stage design allowed us to pursue the following objectives: 1 Testing the participants' ability to read between the lines without being aided by any directional questions and see their capacity to understand that any text cannot be barely constructed, no matter how much its overall word-combination is simple; 2 testing any behavioral change insofar they can trace, depict and decipher the pragmatic values of the text. These objectives will allow us establish the extent to which our learners learn to brainstorm a text to quickly get the gist of a text presented to them. With a background of an experience that they had over the first and second years of tertiary tuition dealing with writing activities, we test how much the directional link between Stage One and the initial Pragmatics test is expected to be short. Such objectives will evenly allow us understand whether our learners possess the aptitude to shorten even more the link between Stage One to get directly to the main Pragmatics test and make economy of the initial Pragmatics stage. Such an oblique directional line between Stage 01 and the Main Pragmatics test is the most sought for we expect our learners to be cognitive learners and thus can inhabit a cognitive niche.



**Figure 1.** From tiptoed to hastened performance

## Method

### Participants

Third year F.L.learners (N=35) at University of Constantine in Algeria participated in a classroom activity. For more convenience, as gender was not does not represent an empirical variable of interest. the analysis of the results was not gender-biased. Written Expression (Creative writing) at the Department of Lettres and the English Language at the University of Constantine is 3 hours a week. The participants have all had about 600 hours of practice with the English language during their freshman and second year tuition. Likewise, our sample can be poised as representative enough of the Department's third-year population. All participants share the same cultural and religious background and such an unwanted bias his cleared. To ensure a

pragmatic understanding equality in the working in a collaborative fashion, have progressed in showing some rigor as the exercise started to develop through its different stages.

#### The Experiment

All participants were native speakers of Arabic sharing a very similar social and cultural background and they are supposed to think with some sort of 'a pragmatic accent, or 'aspects of our talk that indicate what we assume is communicated without being said' (Yule, 1996, p.88).

#### Instruments

##### Presenting the text

On the face of it, the text was not lexically challenging, and thus offered unbiased conventions for testing our objectives. Yet, being deliberately Pragmatics loaded, the text was suitable to test third-year brainstorming wits and did not allow any undesirable deviations and misunderstandings. The text is about a dialog that went between a little girl and her parents.

#### Data collection

The text was presented during an ordinary Written Expression session so that it does not raise any doubts that the learners were undergoing test -which would undermine the test validity. Students were given enough time to read and re-read to get familiar with every grammatical, structural or lexical construction. The activity was carried out in two stages.

##### Stage 1: Withholding the questions

At first, the text was administered without the questions. The purpose was precisely to see how students would deal with the text without the aid of questions.

##### Stage 2: disclosing the questions

For a second activity, questions were disclosed so that students would try to dig deep to dig deeper into to unfold any possible hidden untold meanings. Students were made aware to understand that they should answer beyond the perspective of giving yes/no answers. Students were asked to labor their grey matter to give a full-fledged freedom to their interpretation-as to read between the lines and come up with something rather than feeling 'reluctant to challenge the text' (Wallace;1992, p.46).

The expectancy that students to come up with something is fueled by the researcher's belief that the participants would consider each elements in the text. Elements such as words (diction), grammatical construction or punctuation marks plays the role of rendering the text approachable, and its comprehension easy. Working collaboratively, the participants were expected to have observed the wording of the questions as a key to discovering certain cues to possible unearth pragmatic manipulations of the language.

#### Results

Our key research objectives were the two main stages. For Stage 1: as a warming up, one question was put: "what is the text trying to tell?" Adjacency pairs and pragmatics bearing, the question was purposefully put in the progressive form to [try to] entice students to understand that there could be many possible answers and not only one.

##### Preliminary analyses

The data obtained did not significantly inform about the students' behavioral aptitude in comprehending a Pragmatics cues-loaded text. We, however, confirm normality of the results. A description of the answers are as follows.

- o 25 students said that the text informs about a little girl who wanted ice cream.
- o 05 students said that the text tells about a severe mother refused to let her little girl have an ice cream whereas the nice father accepted.
- o 05 students that the text communicates about a good relationship between the husband and his wife. He asked his daughter whether she got permission from her mother.

On the first question: Did the little girl say anything that was untrue?

The respondents gave the following answers.

- o 28 said no.
- o 05 said yes.
- o 03 gave no answer

For this question, the students' answers were surprisingly different. In effect, we expected that the wording of the question would trigger in students some doubt about the little girl's sincerity. As a first analysis of the answers to the first question, it can be supposed that the 28 respondents who said 'no' have considered that in saying, "yes, Daddy I have", the little girl gave a grammatical answer. In effect, considering his daughter as a small charming sweet girl, the father did not go into asking a full-fledged question as: "Have you asked your mother, and has she accepted? Or 'has your mother accepted that you have an ice cream?" The little girl's pragmatic-loaded answer supports Oxford's (1990) purport that the 'concept of strategy has spread outside the bounds of physical warfare into a variety of other(...)conflict(...)situations(...)such as(...)conversations(...)viewed by some as battles of will or wits" (p, 238. Italics ours). The will to get an ice cream has been consolidated by the little girl's witty grammatical but not innocent answer!

On the second question: Did she intend to lie?

The participants gave these answers.

- o The answers were as follows: 20 said no.
- o 11 said yes, she intended to lie.
- o 04 said nothing.

For this question, the students' answers were surprisingly different; too. This second question did not yet prompt any doubt that there was something 'hidden' in the little girls' answer. Thus were the answers.

The unclad evidence is that had the little said the truth and answered in a clearer and more elaborate construction, she would have revealed her mother's refusal and her father would not have allowed her to have an ice cream. The little girl openly intended to lie.

Again, the same battle of wits continues for the little girl gracefully utilized her will (the desire to have an ice cream) and wits (the intention to lie), changing from bay-face little girl to be as sharp as a tack, cunningly utilizing one part of the answer and withholding the other.

On the third question: If you were this little girl's parents and found her out, what would you do and why?

The answers are the following.

- o 15 said they would severely punish her by having no ice cream for a month!
- o 10 said they would bit her so that she would not lie again.
- o 07 remained indifferent to what she did

- o 03 said they would reprimand and advise her not to lie again because it is bad to lie.

Answers to this question seem to come from within and that culture and religion appear to have shaped several of them. In effect, the 15 respondents' answers suggest that they did not like the father to be laughed at, that the little girl did something wrong which necessitates punishment. The 07 respondents who abstained could have considered that the story of this little foxy girl is fictional. In saying that they reprimand and advise her, the remaining 03 respondents have given a stereotype answer vis-à-vis sweet liars.

However, at this level the last question had deliberately generated an understanding of what truly happened. The wording of the question has left no doubt about the little girl's vulpine intentions!! The answers were significantly clear that finally, the students understood the untold in the text.

Discussion

### **Cues and meaning disconnection: the unseen cues**

Except from the third question that has allowed for a denouement of the story, students did not rely very much on clues and syntactic construction to discover the pragmatic mysteries of the text. As an operational definition, a cue is a word, a sign, a mark or the like to signal something that might be of interest. In the text presented, many of such cues were almost all unseen by the respondents. The following is an analysis of the content of the text pragmatic of the unseen cues that lead to possible inferable meanings.

### **Grammatical Cues**

Starting from line 2, the text starts to be pragmatically loaded. The sentence is a triple (emotion-free) negation "no, certainly not, not before lunch. Such a cohesive construction reveals the mother's care of her little daughter's diet.

On line 5, the little girl gave a correct grammatical answer (she could have answered by a mere 'yes, Daddy'). Such a bold and clear answer reflects at least two things: boldness: because the little girl has started her lie-game with her father; and clarity because she wanted to avoid any further unwanted question from her father –which would have led to the father's refusal.

On line 6, the use of the "suppose" allows for different interpretations. First that since her mother accepted, he would not go against the mother's allowance. Second, it shows that the father has hesitated because he evenly cares about his little girl's diet, has finally but reluctantly accepted his little girl to have an ice cream before lunch.

### **Punctuation cues**

On line 2, it worth noting that even though there was a triple negation, the author did deliberately not use any exclamation point. This implies that by refusing (three times), the mother was definitely not angry, but was rather caring of her little girl. Consider the answer of the respondents to the third question.)

On line 3, although between parentheses, this group of words "goes upstairs to father" does inform about the story is building up. Indeed, the little girl knew that first her father who was upstairs (notion of place) was not listening to what went between her and her mother. She decided to go up and ask him for the ice cream. The untold is that in all likelihood, the little girl was prepared to tell something to her father –knowing that her mother was not be listening, either!

On line 6, the pair of commas separating 'then' from the rest of the father's utterance, suggest that the father understood that his daughter asked her mum who has allowed her to have

an ice cream. The ‘then’ set off between commas is a conclusion of a deal made by the little girl with her parents.

It is worth stating that students who could understand somewhat that the little girl did lie, did not pay attention at all to any of the aforementioned cues. From an analytical stance, the students have just guessed what happened between the little girl and her parents, and their answers were not the results of a sound cues-bound analysis.

### Conclusion

The experiment was conducted to see into how F.L learners view the construction of meaning across words while reading a passage. The results sustain our purport that foreign language learners must be made acquainted with how to read any passage with critical eyes and minds, leaving nothing to chance. Even though the text presented is just an example of English pragmatics and diction, it has allowed to shed some more light on how carefully considering any cues; scrutinizing vocabulary and cautiously examining diction help understand underlying meaning. Just as the detective hunts for cues and clues in his investigation for uncovering the mystery, so should a foreign language learner do to pursue any cues liable to help him manage to unfold the untold. FL students are bound to know how [genuine] texts are constructed and loaded with pragmatic-cues, and that each one of such ‘signs’ is worth considering.

The bottom line is that the experiment has allowed at a first stance to cast some doubt about the efficacy of the existing Written Expression syllabus [and the LMD system] in our tertiary education. More efforts should be deployed if we wish to make of our students cognitive learners and I see them inhabitants of a cognitive niche.

### About the Author

#### Professor Nacif LABED, PhD

- o EFL teacher for 32 years. Practitioner researcher at the Languages and Translation Researchiatory, University of Constantine and editor in chief of the International Review of Modern Translation (issued at the Languages and Translation Researchiatory)
- o Head of Department of Ttranslation, University of Constantine
- o Poet. Un homme, une bougie et une poignée de gens (A Man, a Candle, and a Handful of people) (Editions: Union Algérienne des Ecrivains Algériens. Alger, 2003 –in French);
- o Mondialisation de l’amour, mondialisation du feu. (Globalization of Love, Globalization of Fire) (translation from Arabic into French of two collections of poems by Azzeddine Mihoubi (former head of the Union of Algerian Writers, and Minister of Culture). Editions: Assala Publishers (Sétif, Algérie). azzeddine@yahoo.fr

I hereby confirm that the submitted paper is my original work and it is by no means going under any review by any other journal.

### List of References

- Frank, C., M. Rinvolucris, and Marge, Berer (1987) Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning. London: Edward Arnold.
- Frendo, Evan (2005) How to Teach Business English. Pearson Education Limited
- Grice, H.P. (1975) Logic and Conversation ’ in Cole and Morgan Syntax and Semantics.(3) 41-58
- Oxford, Rebecca (1990) Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know

- Heinle and Heinle Publishers, Boston
- Pinker S (1997) *How the Mind Works*. Norton: New York
- Pinker, S. (2003). Language as an Adaptation to the Cognitive Niche. In S. Kirby & M. Christiansen (ed.) *Language Evolution: States of the Art* (pp. 16-37). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pinker, S. (2007) *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*, 10. Viking: New York.
- Pinker, S. (2010) *The Cognitive Niche: Coevolution of Intelligence, Sociality, and Language* *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 107, 8893-8999
- Tooby J, DeVore, I. (1987) *The Reconstruction of Hominid Evolution through Strategic Modeling*. In Kinzey WG (ed.) *The Evolution of Human Behavior: Primate Models*. SUNY Press: Albany, NY.
- Wallace, Catherine (1992) *Reading*. Oxford University Press.
- Widdowson, H.G. (2007) *Discourse Analysis*. Oxford University Press.
- Yule, Brown (1996) *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.