Pragmatic Analysis and Comprehension of Poorly Written EFL Text

Oveesa Farooq

Assistant Professor, Department of English, College of Languages and Translation -Female Campus, King Khalid University, Abha, KSA

Rizwana Wahid *

Assistant Professor, Department of English, College of Languages and Translation -Female Campus, King Khalid University, Abha, KSA

Abstract

Pragmatic presuppositions are conditions which are necessary for a sentence to be appropriate in a given context. It is presumed that the context plays a crucial role in understanding the written or spoken text. The written text includes emails, letters, essays, passages, etc. but this paper has mainly concentrated on simple written text of undergraduate EFL students. As such, in the event the poorly written text (pieces of conversation, essays) is difficult to discern, the measures to be taken to understand/analyze the text under consideration forms the crux of this paper. An important thing about texts under study for pragmatic analysis is the approach to facts and opinions. It is presumed that the best way to understand a poorly written text is to collect the background information about the text, and to take the pieces of conversation as a whole rather than dissect the text or speech word by word, consequently making the text to be understood correctly in the light of the relevant context. It puts emphasis on teachers as they should employ certain strategies to teach students how to make their text comprehensible. They are very poor in writing skills and at most of the places, the text appears non sensible which makes analysis complex and ambiguous. And taking the help of context plays a significant role in comprehending such text.

Keywords: pragmatics, written text, contextual meaning, morpho-syntactic patterns

INTRODUCTION

Meaning seems to be the most obvious and the most obscure feature of language, at the same time. It is obvious because it is what language is used for—to communicate with each other, to convey 'what we mean' effectively. From receiving the language signals sent by the speaker to comprehend the meaning, there are a number of processes involved which of course need a lot of cognitive processes. However, the steps in understanding something said to us in a language in which we are fluent are so rapid that we have little conscious feeling for the principles and knowledge underlying this

communicative ability as a whole. Pragmatics is concerned with the use and function of language. It is a study of contextual meaning communicated by a speaker or writer, and interpreted by a listener (Yule, 2006). It defines the relation between the structural properties of an utterance, and its deployment and reception by language users. It studies how the 'meaning' of an utterance depends on the circumstances in which it is uttered or simply how people use linguistic actions. For example, "I met Harry and his wife at the airport while coming out of the washroom", one cannot think that there is a single washroom for both males and females, that too at the airport. So, it means that while I was coming out of the washroom, I met Harry and his wife". The most important thing is the context of utterance i.e., the background knowledge of the interlocutors, information conveyed in other parts of the conversation (spoken or written text), as well as the baggage of world view or experience of interlocutors. Sometimes we give too much information about the things which are not needed according to the context and this diverts the attention of reader towards those things. Besides, grammar and spelling, this work has concentrated on the meaning of the text and the role of pragmatics helping in understanding such poorly written text.

Grice's theory simultaneously addresses two fundamental problems about linguistic interactions. The first one is, how can we distinguish between a natural and an unnatural discourse? In other words, what characterizes coherent discourse progression? Grice's answer is that interlocutors first and foremost abide by the Cooperative Principle, which dictates to them to "make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice, 1975, p. 45). Presuming that this agreement is adhered to, the interlocutors can further assume that four maxims and eight sub-maxims inform speakers' utterances, and hence, addressees interpretations: Quantity (informativity), Quality (truth and reliability), Relation (relevance), and Manner (optimal choice of linguistic form).

The second question is, how can speakers convey more than they explicitly encode? Grice proposed that interlocutors need not always straightforwardly obey the maxims in order to be cooperative. He offered the mechanism of conversational implicature generation to account for such cases. The idea is that speakers guide their addressees to extract more meaning out of their utterances than they actually encode. Taking into consideration the encoded message, the maxims, as well as relevant contextual background, addressees must "read between the lines" in order to process the additional inferred meanings intended by the speaker. These conversational implicatures may be generated in order to make sure that some maxim is abided by, or in order to justify an apparent maxim violation.

The scope of pragmatics

Truth-conditional semantics focuses on sentence meaning, and its purpose is to analyze sentence meaning in the light of formal rigor and logical plausibility by assigning truth conditions to sentence meaning in compliance with ongoing states-of-affairs. Nevertheless, the analysis of the structure of the sentence and the encoded lexical

content in terms of truth-conditions, needs supplementing by inferring information about meaning supplied by other sources (Chapman 2000). As Capone (2005) points out, language is both 'an instrument of thought' and 'an instrument of social action'.

In the analysis of meaning in actual communicative situations, the key notions to be looked into are speaker's meaning and intention, and the recovery of speaker's meaning and intentions by the addressee. Meaning and intentions play a vital role at both ends (the speaker's end and the receiver's end). Grice (1975) defines meaning by resorting to speaker's intentions and the reflexive nature of those intentions, namely their need to be recognized as such by the addressee. Speaker's reflexive intention towards the hearer is the intention to have the hearer recognize that when making an utterance in a specific context, speaker intends the utterance to have a certain effect on the hearer. Whether the conversation is written or spoken, the context is very important. Though spoken text can be understood because of the certain supra-segmental features in it, the difficulty is in understanding the written text. It is presumed that the context (Pragmatics) plays a crucial role in understanding the written text.

Keeping in view the difficulties that Saudi undergraduate students face while writing EFL text, this paper discusses the measures that should be taken to understand a poorly written text and to improve it pragmatically. One always takes the help of context to understand the meaning of ambiguous words, phrases, sentences or the whole text but here the text is very poor with lots of grammatical and spelling mistakes and how context is used by the readers to understand it is a focus of this paper. In other words, we can say that the text is morpho-syntactically very poor and in such situations, pragmatic strategies play a vital role and such strategies can be employed to teach students how to write text according to the appropriate context.

The Importance of Context

Context is everything. It shapes the meaning in all communication whether written or spoken. Without context one cannot convey his message effectively. When your message is delivered in one context, but received in another, it likely leads to miscommunication. This is what happens with the text written by EFL undergraduate students of Saudi Arabia. It is assumed that they lack the knowledge of context. What they do is more or less a translation. We can appreciate how someone can mean more than they are 'strictly speaking', say by considering the same thing said in two different contexts. This could be made clear with an example. Consider two people, Reema and Raima, who have recently become friends. If Reema says to Raima, "I've got a gift for you, you will love it!" Raima will feel good about the situation, and she will say "Oh! Thank you". After showing the gift, Reema asks Raima, "So, how was the gift?" If Raima says, "It was nice. I liked it." It will have one kind of effect on Reema. But if she (Raima) says, "Wow! The gift was really awesome, I loved it", the effect is likely to be quite different, as her statement in the former case is not so full of enthusiasm and excitement, as it is in the latter one.

The difference does not come from the content of what is said but from the operation of a general pragmatic principle: While evaluating something on a scale of values, putting

it at a certain point on the scale implies that all the higher values on the scale are inappropriate. It is our background assessment that positive feeling is ranked on a scale with 'love' higher than "like". And what is important here is that this scale principle is applied so quickly and automatically that it is easy to overlook the fundamental pragmatic difference between what is actually said and what is implied by saying it.

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. As discussed above, spoken form is still easy to understand since it is always supported by features like tone, intonation, pitch, stress, etc. (Supra-segmental phonology), but written text is quite difficult to understand because no such forms can be seen there. As far as the spoken form is concerned, it is the real, physically graspable unit of meaning that carries some informative contribution through

- the words used,
- the structure,
- its location in the conversation setting,
- the additional senses it triggers within that particular context,
- the immersion in the overall system of gestures and other ways of conveying meaning.

The most important of these sources is the context of utterance (the background knowledge of the interlocutors, information conveyed in other parts of the conversation or written text, as well as the baggage of world experience of interlocutors). The role played by context whether it is physical, social or cultural-in shaping the decisions writers make as they compose a text and that readers make as they construct meaning from a text. For writers, context shapes -- some might argue that it actually causes -- the purposes for writing. Moreover, context affects the opportunities, requirements, and limitations that affect the choices writers make as they compose their documents. For readers, context shapes their attempt to construct meaning as they read. Physical context can enhance or diminish their ability to read the document. Social context can affect the extent to which writers and readers share common experiences and expectations about a text. Cultural context will affect the fundamental assumptions, beliefs, and aspirations that they bring to the reading of a text.

This paper focuses on poorly written text, and the role of pragmatics in understanding such text.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Motta-Roth (2013) in "The Role of Context in Academic Text Production and Writing Pedagogy" says that the problem of text production in academic genres has been a challenge for undergraduate and graduate students as well as for writing teachers from different departments.

One of the main challenges in language education and research is to teach creative ways to negotiate the norms of the language system (grammar) within the academic culture: the set of meanings, rules, values, power relations and relevant genres that constitute the social practices of a community. Educating students about the uses of language in specific contexts depends on clear descriptions of the connections between text and context. Motta-Roth has defined Text and Context as two sides of an experience.

Text and context as two sides of experience

 Understanding how a text fits a rhetorical moment depends on awareness of how a text constructs an institutional context (law system, science, school/ university, business, etc.). Two simple (and to a certain extent obvious) arguments motivate the activities of the "Academic writing cycle": first, in order for students to become writers in their field, they need to become discourse analysts (to produce the texts that are adequate in the discipline, they must learn to read these texts, learn how they function by analyzing not only linguistic form and content, but the interactions that these texts construct and structure); and second, in a cross-disciplinary classroom, students from different fields need to realize how language works from a socio-interactionist perspective, that is, they need to understand that texts work differently in each field depending on the nature of the activities that each area of study conducts, and the kind of relations the participants maintain to produce knowledge.

Vygotsky (1986) and Halliday (1994) both state that we learn the language we speak because we interact in the contexts in which we use that language to conduct social activities. Motta-Roth (2013) has synthesized this view in his own terms: As learners come to realize the social arrangements of their environment, they develop reflexivity upon the rules of grammatical operation and text structures. Learners need to reflect on context and text, on how texts contribute to context dynamics. This view offers a set of implications for academic writing that can be summarized in three "Discourse-analytical principles" that guide pedagogic practice:

(1) In order to understand the uses of formal elements in language, learners must reflect upon their context;

 (2) To be able to write, novice writers need to analyze the relationship between social practices and texts, comparing what they have been able to deduct from their observation with the texts produced in this context (journals, books, dissertations, book reviews, etc.), focusing on how research activities, social roles and relations are constructed in texts;

(3) To learn a language, learners must learn to analyze discourse (McCarthy & Carter, 1994, p. 134).

 By reading and deconstructing exemplars of published texts from a lexical, grammatical and discursive perspective, learners will learn to write, revise, and edit their own texts more effectively. By adopting these three principles, learners develop discourse-analytical abilities that will help them fine-tune their text form and content to a

projected audience, thus avoiding the "writing-in-the-vacuum syndrome" (writing without a purpose and an audience in mind) that might arise when taking a text-focused or process-focused writing course.

Carnap's (1942) mentions "the analysis of the relations between speaking behaviour and other behaviour; … ethnological and sociological studies of the speaking habits and their differences in different tribes, different age groups, social strata …" (p. 13) – all subjects that earlier would have been classified as sociolinguistic or ethno linguistic, but which today are considered as truly pragmatic in nature.

Grice (1975) says that to analyze meaning in actual communicative situations, the key notions to be looked into are speaker's meaning and intention and recovery of speaker's meaning and intentions by the addressee. He defines this meaning by resorting to speaker's intentions and the reflexive nature of those intentions, namely their need to be recognized as such by the addressee. Speaker's Reflexive Intention towards Hearer is the intention to have the Hearer recognize that when making **an utterance** in a specific context, speaker intends his utterance to have a certain effect on the Hearer.

METHOD AND ANALYSIS

A study was conducted on the undergraduate EFL students of Saudi Arabia where the Morpho-syntactic patterns including sentences and words uttered by them were studied. The data conducted was all written and the whole frame work was based on those written pieces of conversation. The data was analyzed syntactically and was assumed to be comprehended with the help of pragmatics (context) as the response given was very poor. Some examples of data are given below:

1. *Miss I want to talk about my project*
Doctor because my paper without binding?
Miss please tell me what wrong with my project
I was tired when doing my project. But I want submit my paper again, so give me good grade.

Observation 1

In the sentences given above, functional words are missing at most of the places, forms of tenses are absolutely wrong, sentence structure or word order is inappropriate. The major part of this conversation is ungrammatical, but the word 'project' makes it comprehensible and the reader has the background knowledge about the context in which it was written.

2. *Hello Teacher,*

Will there be a lesson tomorrow because all teachers apologised. So can you also postpone lecture tomorrow?

Observation 2

In the first instance, teacher could not get her. The word *'apologised'* confused the teacher. The student's next sentence was "can you also postpone lecture tomorrow" which made teacher to understand that other teachers have cancelled class tomorrow so her students' also want her to cancel the class for tomorrow. Here, the single word 'postpone' made the whole sentence comprehensible because the word postpone was used according to the context.

3. *First I couldn't come to the college because my driver had his country trip. He is a foreigner not saudi , My father in the war in Jizan. So I cannot come see my project. Second, this semester we have a lot of exam, a lot of project, we cannot come you and discuss with you. Sometimes we have two exams the same day. How we cover all of that, help me please. I did not like my total, my total is 41. I could not show my mother my total, this is the first time I took 41 in my studies.*

Observation 3

In the aforementioned example, the most prominent errors or mistakes we can say are the syntactic errors. In Arabic, word order is VSO and students use the same word order in English as well. They omit function words but content words and the context by which the sentence can be understood, are there. So here, it is the context of the content which brings meaning into consideration.

In this example, the student writes about her problems (though ungrammatical), she talks about her father who is in Jazan, she talks about the driver who doesn't come on time, she discusses her work schedule, all these things indicate that she either needs some kind of help in transport, or emotional support since her father is in Jazan, serving the nation, she wants to lessen her work load but at the end when she says that "my total is 41, I don't like it" it shows that she wants more marks; and is using the word 'help' which is understood in the context of 'marks' (which are 41) and 'grades'. So, context is very important in understanding each and every piece of writing. Same is the case with Example No.1 which is all ungrammatical but can be understood with the word project. It therefore makes one easy to understand when we take the context of project into consideration and the whole conversation is understood.

Some more examples which were taken during online class. These are discussed below:

1. *In the online class, the class was going on and one of the student wrote in chat box.*
Miss I am tired, I want to go
Teacher: why ???, what happened?
Student: I am very tired, I want to go.

In the first instance, it was surprising for the class that this particular student wants to go because she is tired. Does it mean that she didn't find the class interesting? As this conversation happened in the classroom, so the context was classroom. If the student is not interested, she won't attend the class at all, but in the middle of the ongoing class, if any student says that she wants to go, the teacher understands that she might not be feeling well and wants to leave the session.

2. *Teacher,* h*e makes me out of the room, I can't attend class. What should I do?*

The student wanted to say that her internet was disconnecting and she was not able to join the room for online class. But she couldn't explain it. What she said had many interpretations. It looked like she has a kid who is disturbing her, or her husband, father or brother is not letting her sit in the room for attending her class or somebody wants her to move out of the room. Then, at last she said that she cannot join room because of internet problem. She used 'he' to refer to the internet and here the context of 'room' helped to comprehend the text.

3. An explanation from a student who couldn't attend online class.

Hi Dr.
I want to tell you about the reason why I missed the last days about Black board.
It's n't to enter the link with me. I wish you to consider this circumstance and delete my absences because I have no Sin in that.
All respect to you
Your student

Observation 4

In this excuse, the text is understood with the help of a word 'link', she was not able to click the link or we can say that link didn't open and that was the reason why she didn't attend online classes.

4. An example of an Essay which was written by one of the informants. The Essay was "My Favourite Person". Here it is

My sister

My sister is favorite. She is student in college. She is 22 age. she is married. She is 2 children. She is in born in Riyadh . she is hair black and tall. She is eyes green. She is dark black. Good looking she is beautifull. I go want in Riyadh because my sister live there. There is my house sister, three bath roomss, two living rooms, park, five bed rooms, two kitchens. My sister house is very large. My house sister is very nice. My sisters love me because honest.

Observation 5

This essay is full of syntactic errors. The structure of sentences and the use of tenses is absolutely wrong. In this essay, the informant talks about her sister and her sister's house. The way she expresses her feelings about her sister and the house are same. Keeping the grammatical mistakes and other mistakes discussed above aside, we understand the whole content because of the name of the essay (which implies that the student is talking about the person she likes). Otherwise a lot of things are written about the house. So, here the pragmatics plays a role in understanding this poor text which shows that the essay was written in the context of 'My Favourite Person'.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper considered poor text of the students, and the role of pragmatics in understanding such text. The conversation or any piece of written stuff is deconstructed, subject to the prevailing context. According to the examples given above, the context is academic and the words that have been emphasized e.g. marks, project, grades, link, sister, etc. make the conversation comprehensible. This way of conceptualizing meaning permits certain logical relations to be defined.

In a pragmatic text, one needs to be local. A descriptive text, for example, tends to be concrete, and its topic needs to be well-prepared. This is the issue with most creative essay papers. Also, in most cases creative writing tends to shock and catch; this is why there is so little interest towards old traditions and rituals. Pragmatic texts are turned towards their readers. These texts are relevant for their value here, meaning that they describe objects familiar to everyone.

Last but not the least, an important thing about pragmatic texts is the approach to facts and opinions. While in analytical writing, a fact is the most important part of the text, creative essay papers are turned towards the feelings and abstractions, which prove to be even more successful in the long run.

The best way to understand poor text is to collect the background information about the text, looking at the sentences, or any piece of conversation as a whole which makes it easy to understand the text. If we take the meaning of words individually, then the whole text might assume an irrelevant meaning, which in any case is an exercise in futility. It means one should take context into consideration to understand the poor text and the students should be given certain strategies to learn how to make the text comprehensible. They translate their conversation in Google translator and make their text incomprehensible because Google translator translates the text, without any concern with the context or situation. So, the students themselves have to concentrate on the context, they have to look at the different meanings of the word in different contexts, and choose the word according to the proper context which best suits the situation. If we take an example of essay given above, the student discusses her sister's house more than her sister, which is irrelevant according to the topic of the essay. But the reader understood it with the help of a context because *context* gives reader information about the situation in which the text was written. The way writers shape their texts is dramatically influenced by their context but in the case of this paper, the case is different. As we saw that text is very poor lacking grammar, syntactic order, function words and it is only content words and their context by which text is comprehended. But when these students will be taught to use proper context and for that they need to know the different meanings of the word and use the word which is appropriate according to the context. They can use POS tagger (part of speech tagger), Morph Analyzer, dictionaries which will provide full information about the words and their context as well to make their text sensible. They should use an appropriate word in an appropriate context. Look at this example,

Dear teacher, I am happy to join your class this semester during your class. I found your good behaviour and patience when you teach students. I hope you good luck. Here the student uses the word *'hope'* instead of *'wish'* which makes the text inappropriate. So, by using above mentioned things, they can improve their vocabulary and learn to use it contextually.

It is recommended that while making students learn the proper use of context, they should also be taught the basic rules of grammar. They should be taught from the beginning. That is, they should start with the parts of speech for knowing different words in terms of grammar. Then they should go to the next level which is the sentence level where they will learn the word order. Here they can begin with simple sentences, then complex sentences, etc. Once they learn how to make a sentence, they will be able to write conversations in a proper syntactic and semantic order. And above all, they need to make the proper use of context because by knowing the context, they can use the words properly and then put them in syntactic order. In this way, their text will become comprehensible not only to their concerned teachers who are aware of the context but to the other readers as well who have no knowledge about the fact that the given piece of writing was discussed or written in which context. Because when the word order is proper, words (content words) used are appropriate as per context then the whole conversation becomes comprehensible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

Aldera, A. S. (2016). Cohesion in written discourse: A case study of Arab EFL   students. *Arab World English Journal*, 7 (2), 328-341.

Allen, J. (1995). *Natural language understanding* (2nd ed.). Redwood City, CA: Benjamin Cummings, Pub.

Andrews, R. (2010). Teaching sentence-grammar for writing: the evidence so far. In T. Locke   (Ed.), *Beyond the grammar wars: a resource for teachers and students on developing language knowledge in the English/literacy classroom*. Routledge.

Ariel, M. (1988). Referring and accessibility: *Journal of Linguistics*, 24, 65-87

Capone, A. (2005). Pragmemes (a study with reference to English and Italian). *Journal of Pragmatics,* 37(9), 1355-71.

Carnap, R. (1942). *Introduction to semantics.* Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

Chapman, R. S. (2000). Children's language learning: An interactionist perspective. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 41 (1), 33-54.

Chierchia, G, & McConnell-Ginet, S. (1990). *Meaning and grammar.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Clark, H. H. (1996). *Using language.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Motta-Roth, D. (2013). The role of context in academic text production and writing pedagogy. *Revista de Lenguas para Fines Específicos*, 19, 329-351

Grice, H.P.(1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J.L. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts* (pp. 41-58). New York: Academic Press.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar* (2nd ed.). London: Edward Arnold.

Jackendoff, R. (1983). *Semantics and cognition.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

McCarthy, M., & Carter, R. (1994). *Language as discourse: Perspectives for language teaching*. London: Longman

Siegel, L. S. (2008). The repeated path between transparency and Opacity in language. In U. Bellugi, & M. Studdert-Kennedy (Eds.), *Sign and Spoken language: Biological constraints on linguistic form* (pp. 229-243). Weinheim, Germany: VerlagChemie.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics.* Oxford: OUP.

Yule, G. (2006). *The study of language* (2nd edition). Cambridge: CUP.