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The Pragmatics of Cooperation and Relevance for Teaching and Learning

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Education draws on such a broad range of theories and practices that important pragmatic theories based on the philosophy of language such as Grice's theory of cooperation (1975) and Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory (1995) have not always been considered essential even for language teachers. McCarthy (1991, p. 2), for example, in his introduction to discourse analysis for language teachers, finds no place for Grice, classifying Gricean pragmatics as intrinsically interesting, but "of little practical adaptability to the language teaching context", adding that, over a ten-year period, he has "never met an occasion where the maxims could be usefully applied." In contrast, as a teacher of languages for over thirty years in many different countries and contexts, I have come to see pragmatics, including Gricean pragmatics, as *an* essential if not *the* essential discipline for teachers to understand both what they are teaching and what is happening in their classrooms. As a discipline concerned, "not with language as a system or product *per se*, but rather with the interrelationship between language form, (communicated) messages and language users" (Oatey and Zegarac in Schmitt, 2002, p. 74), it is difficult to see pragmatics as irrelevant to a profession so centrally and essentially concerned with people, language and language use. Teaching and learning are always mediated through language, so theories of communication, precisely expressed by those trained philosophers who have turned their attention to the practical use of language, could arguably be of intrinsic interest to all teachers. For *language* teachers, however, they are of relevance not only for insights into the process of teaching and learning through communication but also for a consideration of what is being taught.

This discussion, instead of asking whether such important theories of communicative practice are applicable, will directly address *how* they are applicable. It will be necessary to adopt a dual approach considering both what is taught in language lessons and how language is taught through classroom communication. Pragmatics is doubly applicable to language teaching, because classroom language teaching is an occupation which essentially uses language in a social context to promote the learning and teaching of language for use in social contexts. As the discipline par excellence which considers why communication often fails and how it can be more successful, pragmatics is a central competence to teach students who will use language outside the classroom *and* to teach teachers who will mediate its use for learning inside the classroom. English language teaching must now increasingly consider the ever-increasing variety of contexts in which speakers across the globe are learning and using English. Theories of practice that shed light on how language is used in context and how people negotiate understanding, however different they may be in ability, culture and status are essential to our professional understanding.

Theories of communication can always be put to double use by language teachers. During the so-called communicative era, communicative theory sometimes tended to be applied only to the content of language lessons, to what teachers taught and students learnt. But, retrospectively, we can now see that the language teaching profession could usefully have made more use of this theory to examine its own process. Hymes' theory of communication always had two potential applications to language teaching. Hymes' (1971) work on communicative competence was cited in influential papers on the communicative approach, such as the collection of papers edited by Brumfit and Johnson, (1979) This was influential, in theory at least, in changing the emphasis of what we teach, from teaching language as a self-contained grammatical system towards teaching language for use in social contexts. Hymes' ethnolinguistic essays on language and education (1980), although less frequently cited, were potentially just as relevant as they applied the theory of communication to innovation and interaction in the language classroom, which is itself a social context. Paradoxically, by applying the theory of communication itself to classroom analysis, Hymes' theory can easily be used to support ethnolinguistic studies which indicate

that a so-called communicative approach is not suited to all contexts (see Nunn, 1999, for example).

Similarly, in spite of the increase in interest in pragmatics, we should not see the discipline merely as another dimension of competence for linguistics educators to teach and test. Pragmatics has much, possibly more, to tell us about communication in the educational contexts where so many of us spend so much of our lives communicating and where communication is of the essence. In this brief discussion, I shall consider Gricean pragmatics and relevance theory in relation to pedagogical communication in general and not just to language teaching.

Grice's maxims, which were never intended to be seen as a set of rules to be obeyed, could arguably still serve as useful guiding principles for teachers. Teachers, or students, as normal human beings, deliberately flout them, or unwittingly violate them, but it is still useful to have them there as a point of reference. If we draw on our experience as students ourselves, as classroom researchers/observers and especially as practitioners in our own classrooms, the following table could form a useful checklist for much of what can go wrong in classroom communication. Deliberate and frequent flouting of the maxim of quality, through, for example, a teacher's sarcasm, may become a norm which helps to define the maxim of quality in a particular situation. Experienced teachers could usefully make conscious attempts to self-observe, applying Grice's maxims to their spoken communication with students and might also want to consider them as means of making written communication more efficient. This brief editorial opinion paper will not attempt to provide an exhaustive list of applications, but to name but a few obvious applications that could have wide-reaching consequences, teachers' language use when giving instruction or their contributions to classroom interaction can easily be considered in terms of the maxims of quantity and manner. The maxim of quality is very pertinent to teachers' attempts to provide spontaneous explanations of grammar in that such explanations tend to "lack adequate evidence".

Conversational Maxims (Grice 1975, p. 45)

Quantity	Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange). Do not make your contribution more
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	informative than is required.
Quality	Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
Relation	Be relevant
Manner	Be perspicuous. Avoid obscurity of expression. Avoid ambiguity. Be brief. (Avoid unnecessary prolixity). Be orderly.

The full potential of theories of implicature to both the content of teaching and the process of communicating with students in ELT has yet to be fully exploited, but there is evidence of a growing awareness of the practical applications of pragmatics to ELT. Gabrielatos (2002, cited online), for example, draws on Gricean maxims to propose general solutions to problems common to the classroom. For learners who “may communicate unintended messages through being over/under-explicit or using the wrong register, although they are grammatically accurate” he suggests:

- Avoiding asking learners to be (over) explicit at all times.
- Training learners in understanding the amount of information the listener/reader needs or expects.

White (2001) provides a detailed description of a course design based on Gricean maxims, showing how the maxims of *spoken* interaction can be applied to the teaching of *writing*. The qualities White refers to - clarity, brevity, relevance and sincerity - are arguably usefully considered by any writers, even if maxims are made to be flouted by skilled users. This is an interesting application, because writing often tends to be more efficient than speech and Grice’s theory as well as relevance theory might seem to be almost more suited to issues of efficient written communication. Brown and Yule’s distinction between transactional and interactional language (1983, pp. 2-3) is of interest here. Transactional language is used to convey “factual or propositional information” and has the primary purpose of “the efficient transference of information”. They use “primarily” to imply that there are multiple purposes in communication. Interactional language, by contrast, is used “to establish and maintain

social relationships”. As Brown and Yule point out, “It is clearly the case that a great deal of everyday human interaction is characterised by the primarily interpersonal rather than the primarily transactional use of language.”

The emphasis on “cooperation” clearly signals the relevance of Gricean pragmatics to classroom learning. The communication between students and teachers involves both transactional and interpersonal language, the latter being particularly important with regard to establishing the kind of interpersonal relationship that will enable educational transactions to take place in an atmosphere of cooperation and motivation. Grice’s (1989, p. 26) characterization of “cooperation” – “each participant recognizes in them [talk exchanges], to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction” – could be seen as an essential requirement of classroom discourse. The wording of the principle of cooperation is sufficiently flexible to be applicable to different genres of communication, including classroom communication:

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)

However, useful the maxims may appear as a set of “rules” of good conduct, it is vital to keep reminding ourselves that Grice’s maxims are not rules and are only part of a much broader theory about the inferential process. They are subordinated to the principle of cooperation which is itself only one constituent of a theory which is essentially about implicature in an inferential process. This process requires consideration of the following:

(1) the conventional meaning of the words used, together with the identity of any references that may be involved; (2) the Co-operative Principle and its maxims, (3) the context, linguistic and otherwise, of the utterance; (4) other items of background knowledge; and (5) the fact (or supposed fact) that all relevant items falling under the previous headings are available to both participants and both participants know or assume this to be the case.(1989, p. 31).

Just like in other contexts, maxims of varying kinds applied to the relationship between a teacher and students exist in a complex relationship with each other and are all subordinated to the broadly defined principle of co-operation and influence the process of conversational implicature, the way interlocutors achieve or don’t achieve

understanding. Further maxims related to social harmony such as “be polite” are accepted by Grice. They conflict with the four maxims associated with the efficient transfer of information, such as the maxims of quality or relevance. When the preservation of social relationships conflicts with the maxims of quality, quantity or manner, which make transactional communication more efficient, this does not discredit the co-operative paradigm. Such clashes can be seen as essential and normal features of the communication process leading to useful and necessary inferences, requiring us to balance efficiency with social skill. A teacher who is merely an efficient communicator is unlikely to be a successful motivator of students, just as a teacher who emphasizes social skills alone is unlikely to inspire real achievement.

In the following sample of classroom discourse recorded in a secondary school English class in the Middle East, the teacher (T) uses multiple elicitations, a very common feature of his classroom contributions. This leads to a chorus of bids to contribute from students (SS). The local teacher was criticised for this in post lesson analysis by a western teacher trainer.

T Why?
Why did he send this letter to Farouk Mousa?

SS (teacher teacher)

T Yes, Raad?

S To help his son.

T To help his son, very good, to help his son.

With what?

What does his son need?

What does he need?

(teacher...teacher)

Come on.

The rest. What does he need?

What does Jim need?

Yes? Yes?

He needs...

S some money

T some money. Very good.

Who can tell me again? Telex no 1
What's the main point in telex no 1?
Some of the main points?

Er what have you got from telex no 1 again?
What have you got from telex ...what is it about, telex no 1?
Ha? Telex no 1 ... what is it about?

An analysis of this technique of multiple elicitation, often delivered during this lesson in a declamatory style, can be considered in terms of Grice's maxims of quantity and manner and it is all too easy for an outsider to conclude that there is too much "teacher talk" and repetition and that the teacher could usefully consider the maxim of manner "be brief". But quantity and manner also need to be considered in terms of Grice's Principle to which the maxims are subordinated. Considering the wording of the principle, which refers to making contributions "such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange" might lead to a different conclusion. The "accepted purpose" is difficult to assess but is deducible from the observed effect in the discourse, which is eager crescendos of bidding from the students and very broad participation from all corners of a very large class. Grice also requires us to consider "context, linguistic and otherwise" and other features of the background situation, including the cultural context in which the discourse is embedded. At this "stage in the discourse" the teacher is observably trying to obtain broader participation. This was a mixed ability class of more than forty students, so there might be other pedagogical reasons in the context that require the teacher to override an outsider's view of appropriate quantity and brevity. The declamatory style was also arguably appropriate to the cultural context. However, this is not to say that this teacher might not usefully be asked to consider his own discourse non-judgementally in terms of the principle and its maxims. Further research with other teachers in the same context indicated that this teachers' elicitation style, in terms of both quantity and manner, was atypical. Grice's maxims are not rules to follow blindly, but they do provide the reflective teacher with a useful means of critically examining his or her own interactive behaviour. All teachers can benefit from an external means of re-assessing something that is such an essential component of their daily practice.

While “cooperation” will always be a useful concept for educators, Sperber and Wilson (1995) consider that the maxim of “relevance” is not given enough importance and promote it to a superordinate concept. This focus sometimes appears too narrow, and requires us to acquire a number of concepts which at first sight seem to favour rather opaque jargon, such as “mutual manifest assumptions” or “ostension”. But relevance theory is well worth the “processing effort”, because it is about much more than “relevance”. It contains many insights into the necessary conditions for acquiring knowledge through communication, which are central to the teaching-learning process.

Sperber and Wilson (1995, p. vii) suggest that “individuals must focus their attention on what seems to them to be the most relevant information available”. This is necessary to be as efficient as possible using the smallest possible processing effort. The most efficient communication produces maximum effects with the least possible processing effort. To ensure that classroom communication responds to the requirements of relevance, teachers need to make assumptions about their students’ present state of knowledge. Teachers always feel that what they are teaching is ‘relevant’, but students may perceive the processing effort as too large. This not just a question of “effort” in terms of motivation and commitment. It is also a question of a student’s conceptual and psychological readiness to take on new assumptions. When new assumptions are presented, they need to be perceived as relevant. In terms of relevance theory, teachers perform acts of ‘ostension’, making new knowledge or assumptions ‘manifest’ to students. Acts of ‘ostension’ provide new information not previously available but intended to be optimally relevant.

Relevance theory is a theory of practice and admits what most teachers instinctively know. Making something available or ‘manifest’ does not guarantee it will be learnt by students. According to Sperber and Wilson (152) “a phenomenon is relevant to an individual if and only if one or more of the assumptions it makes manifest is relevant to him.” To be relevant, ‘new’ information or assumptions have to combine with known information or assumptions to produce “contextual effects” (108). Importantly a ‘context’ for Sperber and Wilson (15) is “a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer’s assumptions about the world.” If students perceive no relevant link, even the most motivated and willing students are not able to learn. The student needs to believe

that the teacher has not been obscure. New information, if perceived as relevant, may have two effects: it may lead students to modify or even abandon old assumptions. However, new information may also support and therefore strengthen old assumptions.

The “degree of confidence” we have in our assumptions influence our learning behaviour. ‘Assumptions’ are defined by Sperber and Wilson (1995, p. 2) as “thoughts treated by the individual as representations of the actual world”. Perception is not directly connected to an objectively determined actual state of the world but to assumptions about the world. Education has the obvious aim of developing and improving these assumptions. Providing teachers and students reach a level of communication which meets mutual perceptions of relevance, the real business of educational improvement may begin.

Improvements in our representation of the world can be achieved not only by adding justified new assumptions to it, but also by appropriately raising or lowering our degree of confidence in them, the degree to which we take them to be confirmed. (p. 76)

Teachers are often aware that students place too much confidence in underdeveloped assumptions. An important implication of relevance theory is that the teacher needs to improve awareness about the students’ starting assumptions.

While what appears above might seem mainly theoretical, Grice’s maxims and relevance theory can be built into educational activities of all kinds in a very practical way. (For detailed discussion, see Nunn, 2003 which outlines an instructional procedure for practising and analysing intercultural negotiation, in simulated situations in which high level of awareness of assumptions about common knowledge are of central importance to performance.)

A brief example of how to build in relevance checks into an offshoot of the traditional lecture adapted to content-based language teaching, in the form of a mini-lecture is provided below. Grice’s maxims can be applied quite naturally to the delivery of a lecture. The collaborative note-taking print (Nunn and Lingley, 2004) in the table below illustrates one means of checking its relevance. Students use the print to

consolidate lecture material with a partner, but the teacher also collects the prints to assess the relevance of the overall lecture. Relevance in this case includes but is not limited to comprehension. Applying Grice’s broader theory of implicature and the aspects of relevance theory discussed above also require us to consider other important variables embodied in the inferential process that underlie the delivery and reception of (mini)lectures in addition to the issue of student perception/understanding of lectures, such as the lecture’s awareness and adaptation to students’ L1 culture of learning/teaching, student expectations and what the students bring to the class themselves.

Collaborative Note-taking Print (adapted from Nunn and Lingley, 2004)

You	Your Partner
Mini-Lecture title:	Mini-Lecture title:
Main points of the lecture:	Main points of the lecture:
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
New information:	New information:
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
Questions/comments:	Questions/comments:
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
Self-assessment:	Self-assessment:
General ability to understand the lecture	General ability to understand the lecture
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
Relevance;	Relevance;

<p>Which information was the most relevant?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p>Which information was the most relevant?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>Was any information irrelevant to you?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p>Was any information irrelevant to you?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

This brief paper has considered the applications of just one theory based on the philosophy of language. Teachers can benefit from the precision and rigour provided by trained philosophers such as Grice or Sperber and Wilson as an aid to understanding and operationalizing key concepts such as “relevance” and “cooperation” that are commonly used but rarely precisely defined. As Lowe (2004) points out, theory that informs practice based on the philosophy of language provides a useful tool for the reflective language teacher, and is currently an underexploited resource. This brief discussion has attempted to outline the relevance of pragmatic theory to educational discourse, suggesting that it encourages educators to pay greater attention to the educational process as an essentially cooperative activity, “cooperation” in this sense being rigorously defined in terms of transactional maxims and interactional principles.

While it might be argued that it is obvious that teachers need to be “relevant”, and all teachers are aware of this, “relevance” is defined in pragmatics well beyond the conventional “lay sense” of the term. It is an abstract concept and a difficult one to pin down and operationalize. A detailed awareness of the pragmatic meaning of relevance precisely defined within a coherent theory of communication can provide important insights into how to provide the kind of classroom activities and tasks that are both of practical interest and based on a sound theory of communicative practice. Whereas theories of communication have commonly been applied to the content of language courses, they have less commonly been applied to the process of education, which is always mediated through language.

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