

Session 1: A framework for describing language

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Section 4: How language is used to achieve particular purposes – the purposes of language

Aim of this section is to examine what children know about how to use language to achieve various purposes and what they can do to achieve this. In terms of our **ICPALER** mnemonic, this is the **P - PURPOSES** aspect.

It is possible for a person in a conversation to understand

the ideas being exchanged and know the conventions for communicating these but not communicate successfully because they don't know how to adjust their use of language to fit the particular context.

In this section we 'unpack' the **P** or purpose aspect of ICPALER. It is shown in model opposite.

		E	R
the ideas	single words		
	single sentences		
	discourse		
	its topic or theme		
the conventions	phonological conventions		
	grammatical conventions		
	genre conventions		
the purpose			
ability to learnt			

Ask participants to compare two conversation situations in which they engaged recently, one that was reasonably successful in terms of each person seeming to achieve their goals for conversing and one in which some participants showed they were becoming dis-interested, bored, disengaged or alienated from other conversers. What were some things that made a difference? What made one conversation more successful than the other?

The features they note could lead to less effective communication including a converser who:

- dominated the 'air play', not engaging in effective turn taking, talking over other speakers, talking too loudly.
- did not use 'conversation protocols' satisfactorily, for example, turned to talk to others in ways that were inappropriate for the particular context.
- did not judge how much information to give at any time.
- used conversational techniques and language that were not appropriate for the audience, for example, using phrases that are judged to be offensive by others.
- assumed the audience knew much more / or much less than they did about the topic
- misinterpreted the body language of the audience and didn't adjust to their increasing irritation and disengagement
- did not 'listen between the lines', infer what the other speakers were saying.
- had difficulty initiating conversations effectively; he used 'opening lines' that did not work.

These examples illustrate some of the aspects of what the conversers knew about how language is used. A knowledge of how to use language in social interactions to achieve various purposes or goals for communicating is called the pragmatics of language.

4.1 How language is used in the conversation

Have participants look back at the conversation. What do the conversers seem to know about how to use language to achieve their purposes? They can use the following questions to help them do this:

- How did they use language for different goals or functions?
- How well did they ‘listen between the lines’, link ideas in the conversation with other ideas they had?
- How did they manage and direct their use of language to communicate?
- How did they adjust their use language to fit the particular context and audience?

In what ways did some of the speakers use language?

What was said	Possible goal or purpose for saying it
Miss Brown: <i>Tom, tell us more about your new doggie.</i>	Miss Brown’s goal: to direct the conversation, to initiate Tom’s involvement and give him the opportunity to talk about his dog.
Kath: <i>Our dog .. falled over our pool. Daddie gotted him out.</i>	Kath’s goal: to take temporary control of the conversation, to redirect it, to give herself the opportunity to indicate to the group that she had a dog as well and that things had happened to it.
Will: <i>Gee, did it get drowned?</i>	Will’s goal: to express his feeling, show his concern and to obtain more information.

This conversation suggests that different speakers and listeners used language for different goals. This was determined in part by who else was in the context. Miss Brown probably exerted more control in directing the speech of the children than she would have if the group speaking were all her teaching colleagues.

We can also look at how the participants used language to achieve their goals: they

- took turns and shared ‘air play time’, possibly because teacher was present.
- stayed on the topic and extended and elaborated it. They showed they could maintain the topic; when Kath used ‘it’ in *It got runned over*, they probably knew she was talking about her family’s dog and not Woofa, when Tom said, *It is red and brown* they probably knew he was talking about Woofa.

Speakers use language to achieve a number of purposes. Knowing how we and others use language in everyday contexts for various functions is a key part of our knowledge of language. Young children gradually learn these.

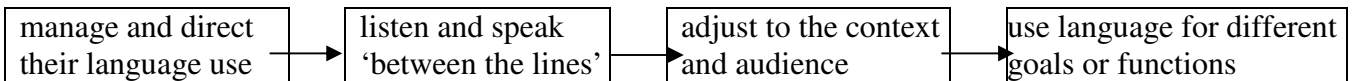
These are the functions or the pragmatic aspects of language. To examine them we can look at how language users

- manage and direct their use of language to communicate .
- listen and speak ‘between the lines’, link ideas in the conversation in non literal ways.
- adjust their use language to the particular context and audience .
- use language for different goals or functions.

We can modify the ICPALER framework to show the components of the **P** or purpose aspect as shown in the unshaded section of the model.

		E	R
the ideas			
the conventions			
the purpose for communicating	manage and direct their language use		
	adjust to the context and audience		
	use language for different goals or functions		
	listen and speak ‘between the lines’		
ability to learnt			

We will examine each of these components of the purposes for communicating more closely in the following sections. The sequence we will follow focuses on how young children:



4.2 How communicators manage and direct their use of language

Effective communicators manage and direct their use of language in various ways: they know how to:

- initiate, maintain and terminate oral transactions, including conversations,
- take turns and share the interactions,
- ‘stay on the topic’ and extend, elaborate, question or otherwise manipulate it, and
- how to adjust what they say to fit the audience and the context; they can take account of what the audience know about the topic and the ability to communicate.

Young children learn gradually to operate in these ways. The analysis of the conversation showed that the children involved had begun to develop these language abilities. They learn to use these in a context specific way, using specific components first in particular situations and gradually learn to transfer and generalise them.

Ask participants to reflect on their students’ ability to use the four components and to suggest successful and unsuccessful instances of each.

Components	successful example	unsuccessful example
how they initiate, maintain and terminate conversations		
how they take turns		
how to ‘stay on the topic’		
how they adjust what they say to fit the audience and the context		

Encourage participants to use their successful and unsuccessful examples to observe the display of a capacity to manage and direct one’s use of language by their students. They can develop behavioural checklists from this chart and examine how their students display the behaviours in activities in which they share listening to and telling stories or recounting experiences, discuss events and engage in other verbal interactions.

We can elaborate the pragmatic aspect of the framework to examine these components of language as follows:

			E	R
the ideas				
the conventions				
the purpose for communicating	manage and direct language use	how they start, maintain, end conversations		
		how they take turns		
		how to ‘stay on topic’		
		how they adjust to audience and context		
	adjust to context and audience			
	use language for different goals			
	listen and speak ‘between lines’			
ability to learn				

4.3 *How communicators adjust their use of language to particular context and audience*

Effective communicators are aware of the need to take account of those with whom they are communicating and the particular context or situation in which the communication is occurring. They adjust and modify what they say in a range of ways, for example, they:

- decide how much information to give at any time; they ‘read’ the audience to decide what it might want to hear, know or discuss.
- judge what others might know about the topic of the communication and adjust what they say accordingly. During a conversation or an informative talk, for example, they may take steps to get an awareness of what others know and shape their communication according to their goals. If their goal is to assist others to learn more about the topic, they may shape what they say so that it targets the existing knowledge of the others. If their goal is to present an identity that shows supremacy of knowledge of the topic, on the other hand, they may communicate in ways that restrict the comprehension of others and indicate to them where their existing knowledge is incomplete or inadequate. Effective communicators ‘read’ the knowledge of the audience and incorporate this in how they communicate, according to their goals.
- selecting the most appropriate words, sentence meanings, conventions to use and intonation patterns to suit the group in the communication. A communicator whose goal is to persuade others may use different language from a communicator whose goal is to inform objectively.
- knowing when they haven’t given enough information for the particular audience and again, according to their goals, take appropriate actions.
- using the context to assist in understanding the intended meaning of spoken language, for example, using body language and gestures. Communicators whose goals are to

persuade others or to exert power over them may use gestures and tones more likely to elicit emotions and affect relevant to their goals.

An example of being able to take account of audience and context is shown in how speakers and listeners understand multiple references to particular people. Successful speakers and listeners know how to refer to events or people in a context who have already been mentioned and co-ordinate this with how they refer to other events and people for the first time. The meaning of pronouns such as ‘her’, ‘them’ ‘what’ and ‘that’ depend on the context and what has already been said.

Young children show an initial egocentricity in their ability to take account of audience and context in their communication. The capacity to estimate what others might know about a topic or to decide what is most appropriate in particular contexts, develops gradually. Some young children communicate with most adults in the ways they communicate with their parents. They may assume that the knowledge of an audience about a topic matches their knowledge.

To sensitise participants to this component, have them plan and contrast how they would communicate a particular topic to:

- their partner / boss,
- colleagues with whom they share a close friendship / whom they barely know,
- a child with whom they had a good / poor relationship, or
- a parent who wanted to challenge/ congratulate them for a decision they had made.

Ask them to identify other areas in which they are aware of needing to adjust their use of language according to the audience and context. What adjustments do they need to make?

How well do their students adjust their use of language according to the audience and context? Ask participants to reflect on their students’ ability to use the five components and to suggest what successful and unsuccessful instances of each could look like in a language exchange.

Collate the outcomes.

Component	successful example	unsuccessful example
judge how much information to give at any time		
judge what others might know during a conversation		
select the most appropriate words, sentence meanings, conventions and intonation patterns to suit the audience		
know when they haven’t given enough information to the audience		
use the context to assist in understanding the intended meaning of spoken language.		

Encourage participants to use their successful and unsuccessful examples to observe the display of a capacity to adjust their use of language to particular context and audience. They can develop behavioural checklists from this chart and examine how their students display the behaviours in activities in which they share listening to and telling stories or recounting experiences, discuss events and engage in other verbal interactions.

We can elaborate the pragmatic aspect of the framework to examine this component of language as follows:

			E	R
the ideas				
the conventions				
the purpose for communicating	manage and direct language use	how they start, maintain, end conversations		
		how they take turns		
		how to 'stay on topic'		
		how they adjust to fit audience and context		
	adjust to context and audience	judge how much information to give		
		judge what others might know during conversation		
		select appropriate words and conventions		
		use the context to assist understanding		
		link ideas in relation to a particular context		
	use language for different goals			
the ability to learnt				

4.4 How communicators use language for different goals or functions

Individuals differ in their goals or functions for using of language. We have already discussed the possible goals held by Miss Brown and Kath in the conversation earlier. Teachers need to be aware that:

- the goals of students at any time may differ from those of the teacher and that it is frequently useful for teachers to infer the goals of students. To do this they need to 'tune in' to how their students are using language at that time. A teacher's goal may be for students to complete a task while a student's goal, at that time, may be to inform the teacher of a recent experience and attempt to use language to do this.
- students differ in how they achieve their goals by using language. Two students may want to avoid doing a task but use language in quite different ways in their attempt to achieve this.
- students differ in how well they can infer the goals of others from the language used. Some students may not be able to infer a teacher's goal when a teacher uses sophisticated pragmatic techniques such as lowering the voice, a change in emphasis or tone, rhetorical questions or sarcasm.

Teachers and students frequently use intonation in sentences and prosody to communicate intentions. The following sets of statements have stress on different words (shown in bold), What would be the goal for stressing each word in each statement?

Sit there please

*Sit **there** please*

*Sit there **please***

I didn't say that

*I **didn't** say that*

*I didn't **say** that*

*I didn't say **that***

Being able to select the specific ideas and conventions relevant to communicating for a particular goal is a key aspect of language use.

There are two aspects to this component; being able to

- identify one’s goals for an oral communication and
- infer the goals of others for an oral communication.

Young children usually develop an awareness of the first before the second; they know what they want when they communicate before they can infer the reason why others are engaging in communication.

Some students have difficulty using language to express their intentions and to communicate their goals. When this happens, they often attempt to use physical means to communicate their feelings and intentions. The physical means are usually much less effective and successful. As students progress through the school, they are expected increasingly to use language in these ways.

To increase participants’ awareness of this component, have them reflect engage in two brief communication sessions, one in which the goal of each communicator was easy to infer and one in which it was more difficult. Have them reflect on

- what are the characteristics of a communicative interaction where it is easy / difficult to infer the goals of each communicator?
- what are the implications for a communicator who finds it hard to achieve her / his goals by communicating?
- how does an audience respond to a context in which it is difficult to infer the purpose or goal of a communicator? How does the audience react?
- what can be done to assist children to communicate their goals more easily?

How well do their students identify their goals for communicating and infer the goals of others during communication? Ask participants to reflect on their students’ ability to do this component and to suggest what successful and unsuccessful instances of each could look like in a language exchange. Collate the outcomes.

Component	successful example	unsuccessful example
identify one’s goals for an oral communication and		
infer the goals of others for an oral communication.		

Encourage participants to use their successful and unsuccessful examples to observe the display of this component. They can develop behavioural checklists from this chart and examine how their students do this.

We can elaborate the pragmatic aspect of the framework to examine this component of language as follows:

			E	R
the ideas				
the conventions				
the purpose for communicating	manage and direct language use	how they start, maintain, end conversations		
		how they take turns		
		how to 'stay on topic'		
		how they adjust to fit audience and context		
	adjust to context and audience	judge how much information to give		
		judge what others might know during conversation		
		select appropriate words and conventions		
		use the context to assist understanding		
		link ideas in relation to a particular context		
	use language for different goals	Identify the goals for an oral communication		
Infer the goals for an oral communication				
the ability to learnt				

4.5 How well do people use language to communicate non-literally?

Young children will frequently be expected to comprehend non-literal expressions such as *Get a wriggle on*, *Put on your thinking caps* or *Cut it out*. They are expected to show their comprehension by acting in particular ways, for example, *I want to hear a pin drop* means: *You need to be very quiet and not talk*.

Other idioms and metaphors often used include: *You let the cat out of the bag*, *I'll wait until the cows come home*, *Pigs might fly*, *You swallowed it hook, line and sinker* and *He's pulling your leg*. Teachers frequently use them as part of their classroom dialogue, for example, for the purposes of behaviour and classroom management. Not all students understand them with equal facility. Many try to interpret them literally. As a consequence, they do not display the acceptable responses.

Communicators often assume that others can use the particular context to assist in understanding the intended meaning of non-literal language. A teacher may say *He's pulling your leg* to a child to indicate that the child's interpretation of what has been said may not be the intended one. The child may not understand what *He's pulling your leg* is actually conveying in the particular context.

Teachers need to assist students to understand what non literal language means in particular contexts and how it maps into particular behaviours. They need to help students to become aware of the need to 'listen and speak between the lines'. In other words, the children need to go beyond what was said and either to try to guess what a non literal statement might mean or else ask for assistance. First of all they need to be able to recognise non literal statements. One clue for children is that they often suggest an unusual picture or image that is not likely to be real. They are more imaginative. The children can become aware, for example, that most teachers don't have cows and so why would they be '*waiting for them to come home*'. Link ideas in the conversation ways.

Linked with this is being able to 'take a conversation further', that is, to add to the evolving message in a communication situation. To extend a conversation, the conversers need to infer. Conversations continue when the communicators can go beyond what has been said and to

extend into related areas. Merely repeating what has already been said would not be seen as functional.

To do this, children need to put together or to integrate what has been said earlier in the context and to link this with what they already know. This helps them to develop a broader interpretation and to think about where it might be going.

How well do their students comprehend non-literal language and know how to extend conversations? Ask participants to reflect on their students' ability to do this component and to suggest what successful and unsuccessful instances of each could look like in a language exchange. Collate the outcomes.

Components	successful example	unsuccessful example
how they read into a message the intended meaning or outcome		
how they use idioms and metaphors		
how they extend a language exchange, use what has been said in more abstract or imaginative ways		

Again they can develop behavioural checklists from this chart and examine how their students do this.

We can elaborate the pragmatic aspect of the framework to include the components of language as follows:

			E	R
the ideas				
the conventions				
the purpose for communicating	manage and direct language use	how they start, maintain, end conversations		
		how they take turns		
		how to 'stay on topic'		
		how they adjust to fit audience and context		
	listen and speak 'between lines'	how they read in a message its intended meaning		
		how they use idioms and metaphors		
		how they extend a language exchange		
adjust to context and audience				
use language for different goals				
the ability to learn				

4.6 Using the four components of pragmatics in an integrated way

Children ultimately need to learn to use the four components in an integrated way to achieve their purpose of communicating. They need to initiate and maintain an exchange, adjust their language to the particular context and audience, use language selectively for specific goals and functions and infer what others are saying in terms of the context and their goals for communicating.

The example below shows this co-ordinated use. In the conversation Tom wants to play bat tennis with Ian at recess time and wants to maximise the chance that Ian will do this.

- Tom: You like playing bat tennis, don't you?
Ian: Yes
Tom: I've got my new bats and ball set. Would you like to see it at playtime?
Ian: Yes
Tom: I'm going to practice my bat tennis with it. Would you like to practise as well?
You're good at it, aren't you?
Ian: Sure.

Tom did not ask Ian directly to play ball with him but rather 'set the stage'. Tom may have anticipated that Ian would have refused if he had asked him outright.

The use of language in social situations for particular goals and purposes is probably more complex than other aspects both to learn and to recognise. It is this understanding that gives communicators the power that comes with language. Being able to communicate effectively in a range of contexts according to one's goals or purposes is what language use is about.

In the classroom teachers use this knowledge to direct and to motivate effective student learning. By teaching and modelling aspects of it, they can guide and lead students become more effective language users and to use language to manage and direct their own learning.

The effectiveness and quality of student teacher interactions will be determined in part by the teacher's knowledge of it. Its use for classroom management and discipline has already been noted. It will also help students to understand the power relationships being communicated through language between teachers and students and within the student group.

4.7 *The implications of the aspects of pragmatics used in a spoken communication for literacy learning*

Ask participants to reflect on links between each of the pragmatic aspects used in oral language and matching functions in literacy. They can note, for example,

- how managing and directing one's language use in speech matches how readers need to understand how writers do this in the texts they write, and also how readers need to manage and direct their reading activity.
- how listening and speaking 'between the lines' in spoken language use matches how readers need to 'read between the lines' in inferential comprehension
- how adjusting to the context and audience when one is speaking and listening matches how readers need to be aware that writers do this as well and that they, as readers need to be aware that this is done in the texts they read.

- how using language for different goals during oral presentations is matched by the same aspect in writing and again readers need to be aware of this.

In addition to these matches, the texts that students read will usually assume a knowledge of the pragmatic aspects. Narrative texts, for example, describe events in which language is used in social interactions, for example, the conversations between the little red hen, the cat, the dog and the duck in “The Little Red Hen”. Understanding how language is used for various social purposes here can influence a reader’s comprehension of the text.

Participants can reflect on

- earlier experiences in which they have observed links between the students’ ability to use the various aspects of pragmatics, for example, individual students’ comprehension of figurative language in particular contexts and their reading ability.
- how they might identify the pragmatic aspects used in the written texts they expect students to read and those they expect students to use in the texts they write.
- how they might investigate directly these links in their teaching, for example, for a topic they were teaching, whether teaching explicitly a particular pragmatics aspect assisted their students to comprehend text or to write about the ideas. Does participation in directed oral language activities about particular aspects prior to reading a text assist their students to comprehend it? Similarly, does a consolidation –review discussion following the reading of a text assist students to recall the aspect on later occasions?

Similar links can be investigated for students engaging in writing activities. Does directed teaching of a pragmatic aspect in oral language activities, prior to writing a text, assist their students to use it? Similarly, does a consolidation –review discussion following the reading of a text assist students to edit their text?

In section 5 we will examine the students’ language learning capacity - Ability to learn.