

# TEACHING SPEAKING TO UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS : THE PRAGMATICS CONSIDERATION

แนวทางการสอนทักษะการพูดภาษาอังกฤษสำหรับนักศึกษาระดับปริญญาตรีตามแนวคิด PRAGMATICS

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper was to detail some recurrent problems in speaking English of Thai undergraduate students, to convey the scope and the importance of pragmatics in communication and the distinction between semantics and pragmatics, to show the application of pragmatics including language function, language level and functional-notional syllabus, to illustrate the characteristics of practice activity appropriate for the improvement of the learner's speaking skill and to propose the effective teaching methodology to promote student's communicative competence and enhance successful communication. The data in this paper were gathered by 2 main methods. The first one is the observation of undergraduate students of Sripatum University taking an oral midterm test in pair. The observation shows 4 main areas of problems in speaking: pronunciation, sentence pattern, word choice and discourse level. In the part regarding pragmatics and its application in teaching speaking, the data were compiled from both linguistics articles and language teaching textbooks.

**KEYWORDS:** Pragmatics, Semantics, Functional-Notional syllabus, Communicative competence

## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อเสนอปัญหาที่มักพบบ่อยในการพูดภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาระดับปริญญาตรี ทั้งทางด้านการออกเสียง รูปแบบประโยค การเลือกใช้คำ และการเชื่อมโยงประโยค และชี้ให้เห็นความสำคัญของการนำแนวคิด Pragmatics แนวคิดเกี่ยวกับหน้าที่ของภาษาและ แนวคิดเกี่ยวกับระดับภาษามาปรับใช้ในการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ พร้อมทั้งเสนอแนวทางและรูปแบบของกิจกรรมในการสอนภาษาอังกฤษที่มุ่งเน้นให้นักศึกษามีความสามารถในการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษได้อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพ ข้อมูลที่นำมาเขียนบทความมาจากการสังเกตนักศึกษาที่เข้าทดสอบการพูดบทสนทนาภาษาอังกฤษและจากบทความทางวิชาการและตำราทางวิชาการต่างๆ

**คำสำคัญ:** แนวคิด Pragmatics แนวคิด Semantics หลักสูตรแบบ Functional - Notionalความสามารถในการสื่อสาร

## Introduction

English plays an important role in Thailand nowadays. It is widely used in both the government sector and the private sector. The government in Thailand continuously promotes the increase of English learning and the effective English teaching. However, in Thailand, the traditional teaching, the teacher-centered approach, has predominated the English teaching for a long time. The main emphasis of teaching is placed on grammar and receptive skills-writing and reading-not on the productive skill-listening and speaking. Teaching in the past has been focused on form not sufficiently on its functional aspects. Thai students consequently face many difficulties in communicating in English due to the lack of communicative competence and the lack of pragmatic competence which includes the awareness of language functions and language levels.

## Result

The data in this paper were gathered by 2 main methods. In the part regarding recurrent problems of Thai students speaking English, undergraduate students of Sripatum University were observed taking an oral midterm test in pair. Each pair was assigned a situation, a place and roles of speakers for speaking. Each pair took 5 minutes to prepare and took at least 12 minutes to speak. The observation reveals 4 main areas of problems in the speaking of the informants: pronunciation, sentence pattern, word choice and discourse level.

### 1. Pronunciation

Informants have problems in the pronunciation of voiced sounds. They cannot distinguish the -ed past tense in different surroundings. Informants also have difficulties in word stress because Thai, a syllable-timed language, has a rhythm in which each syllable tends to

have the same duration (Ladefoged, 1975: 281). They therefore fail to recognize the stress of the word. Informants have difficulties in the recognition of sentence stress and sentence intonation. They tend to stress every word, both function words and content words.

### 2. Word choice

Informants have the limited range of vocabulary, especially the vocabulary for production. They do not know the English words that they want to utter. They therefore stop speaking. Moreover, informants normally use the incorrect words in the context since they misunderstood the meaning of the words.

### 3. Sentence pattern

Informants produce the wrong sentence pattern with the word "although". They utter sentences by directly and literally translating from Thai, their mother tongue. They therefore put the word "but with the sentence beginning with "although". For example,

○ *Although she is my close friend, but I don't like her boyfriend.*

Informants produce the wrong sentence pattern with the word "because". They utter:

○ *Because he is sick, therefore he does not go to school.*

Informants do not insert the auxiliary verb in the negative sentence since in Thai the negative sentence does not require the auxiliary verb. They utter sentence like

○ *I not want to go to Chonburi with you.*

Informants make a negative sentence by only rising the intonation and adding the question words instead of the subject-verb inversion and the auxiliary verb insertion. They produce sentence like

- She goes where?
- Where she goes?

#### 4. Discourse level

Informants have difficulties in the recognition of language level. They use the same language level which is normally the formal one regardless of the context and the appropriateness in speaking. For example, students who took the role of two intimate friends began the conversation as:

"Good Morning. How are you?"

"I'm fine. Thank you. And you?" or

"I'm very well. Thank you. And you?"

instead of uttering "Hi", "Hello", "Fine" or "Not bad" which can convey informality and familiarity.

In addition, they do not know the verbal strategies to compensate for breakdowns in communication and to enhance the effectiveness of communication. They do not use any hesitation fillers like "you know", "well", "Let's see", "Let me think", and "Um". The participants' conversations then lack naturalness and smoothness. The informants' conversations lack coherence and cohesion. The lack renders their conversation quite unnatural and leads to communication failures.

#### Suggestions

Although the problem of the discourse level is not the only problematic area, it is one of the crucial and critical factors affecting success in communication. The following six suggestions are proposed to be adopted as guidelines in teaching speaking for undergraduate students to enhance effective and successful communication. However, these suggestions place an emphasis on the discourse level and the successful communication.

### 1. The Scope and the Importance of Pragmatics

One major linguistic theory that language teachers can apply in teaching speaking to undergraduate students is pragmatics. Pragmatics is the theory of linguistic communication which studies how utterances communicate meanings in context (Trask, 1999: 243). It is the discipline studying linguistic interaction between "I" and "you" (Senawong, 1996: 1). It is the study of the relation between linguistic expression and their users (Leech, 1983: 319). It is the study of the use of language in communication, particularly the relationships- between sentences and the contexts and situations in which they are used (Richards, 1999: 284). It directly relates to speaking skill. As MaryAnn Florez states in "Improving Adult English Language Learners' Speaking Skills" that the form and meaning of speaking are dependent on the context in which it takes place, including the participants, their collective experiences, the physical environment and the purposes for speaking (Florez, 1999: 1). As Jeremy Harmer states that even though language users possess language competence and lexical competence, they may not be able to operate efficiently unless they appreciate how language is used (Harmer, 1991: 14).

Pragmatics is contrasted with semantics, which deals with meaning without reference to the users and communicative functions of sentence (Richards, 1999: 285). In addition, the distinction between semantics and pragmatics tends to be the distinction between meaning and use or between competence and performance (Leech, 1983: 319).

Trask states in Key Concepts in Language and Linguistics that there are two aspects of meaning in each utterance. The first type of meaning is in the domain of semantics. It is intrinsic to a linguistic expression containing it and it cannot be separated from that

expression. The second type of meaning is in the domain of pragmatics. It is the result of the interaction and the interpretation of the linguistic expression with the context in which it is used (Trask, 1999: 243).

Pragmatics and semantics are interrelated linguistic fields and pragmatics is considered a part or an aspect of semantics (Senawong, 1996: 1). Geoffrey Leech states in *Semantics: The Study of Meaning* that the relation between semantics and pragmatics has remained a matter for fundamental disagreement (Leech, 1983: 319). He further proposes three different positions of semantics and pragmatics as follows:

1. Semanticism: Pragmatics should be subsumed under semantics.
2. Pragmaticism: Semantics should be subsumed under pragmatics.
3. Complementarism: Semantics and pragmatics are distinct and complementary fields of study (Leech, 1983: 319).

Although the concept of pragmatics should be adopted in classroom teaching, it cannot be directly taught to students as a theory. Teachers instead should keep its concept in mind and then teach it to students whenever possible through easily understood and explicit examples. Abundant examples should be provided to students as well.

## 2. Language Function

Teachers should possess the concept of language function in mind and apply the concept of communicative function of sentences in teaching speaking so that students are aware of various functions of language.

Every sentence in every language is multi-functional (Keen, 1978 : 66). Many abuses or mistakes in communication involve the confusion of different types of function (Leech, 1983 : 57). Linguists and scholars

continuously propose various sets of language functions. However, one of the most well-known sets and the most acceptable sets is that of Thomas Pyles. According to Pyles, language has seven basic functions: informative, interrogative, expressive, evocative, performatory, directive and phatic (Pyles , 1970: 238).

The informative function is the language used to tell what the speaker believes, to give information about things, and to reason about facts (Pyles, 1970: 234). According to Leech, the language that is used to convey information is known as informational language (Leech, 1983: 57). An informative statement can be either true or false. For instance, "Water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit", "Forty-eight percent of all American live in igloos" and "Cleopatra was bitten by an asp" (Pyles, 1970: 234).

The interrogative function includes all questions that need answers such as "What time is class over?", "Who is that?" and "How do you find the square root of 3.14?" (Pyles, 1970: 234).

Expressive function is the use of words to reveal the feelings and the attitudes of speakers (Pyles, 1970: 234) and of the writer (Leech, 1983: 57). According to Pyles, expressive language passes judgment on whether it is good or bad, evaluates appraises and asserts the speaker's feelings (Pyles, 1970: 234- 235). The most obvious examples of expressive language are swear words and exclamations (Leech, 1983: 40). For example, "Ouch", "Good heavens", "Damn" and "Wow" (Pyles, 1970: 234). Thomas Pyles further points out in *English: An Introduction to Language* that adjectives like "glorious", "beautiful", "excellent" and "good" can be used to express ourselves favorably and unfavorably (Pyles, 1970: 234).

According to Pyles, the evocative language is used to create feelings in the hearer and its aim is to amuse, startle, anger, soothe, worry, or please. It is an

important part of jokes, of tragedies, of advertising and of propaganda (Pyles, 1970: 235). Pyles further gives examples of the evocative language. He states that the evocative language is the language of a mother comforting her child, of a demagogue haranguing the crowd and of a young man wooing a girl (Pyles, 1970: 235).

According to Pyles, the function of a performatory statement is simply to be the action that it states. For example, the defendant at a trial says "I plead not guilty," the statement is the act of so pleading and is the performance of the action mentioned in it (Pyles, 1970: 235).

The directive language is aimed to influence the behavior or attitudes of hearers (Leech, 1983: 40) and to make the hearers do something (Pyles, 1970: 235). Thomas Pyles points out in *English: An Introduction to Language* that the directive language can be given in a variety of ways (Pyles, 1970: 235). However, according to Leech, the most straightforward and the most characteristic structures of the directive function are commands and requests (Leech, 1983: 40) like "Pass the salt" or "Have a seat" (Pyles, 1970: 235). In addition, any other verbal effort, such as statements with "ought" and "must" to control what the hearers do, fall into the category of directive language (Pyles, 1970: 235).

The phatic function is the everyday small talk that people use to establish rapport, make contact with others and assume mutual good will (Pyles, 1970: 236). According to Leech, the phatic function is used to maintain cohesion within social groups. It includes greetings, farewells and routine polite questions such as "How is the family?" and "What happened to Spurs on Saturday then?" (Leech, 1983: 53). Leech states in *Semantics: The Study of Meaning* that in terms of phatic function, what information is conveyed may be

an insignificant matter in comparison with the fact that communication is being kept up at all (Leech, 1983: 58). According to Pyles, when a person says "How are you?", he does not really ask about the hearer's state of health. The appropriate answer is "Fine" or "Not bad, how about you?". When a person says on leaving a party that he has a nice time, he does not in fact say anything about the party. He in fact simply means that he is leaving (Pyles, 1970: 236). In British culture, talking about the weather is a well-known example of phatic function (Leech, 1983: 41).

Teachers should take the level of the learners into consideration while teaching language function. If students are at the intermediate level and possess limited linguistic knowledge of the target language, teachers should convey only the essential and basic functions like informative function, directive function and interrogative function. Teachers gradually convey more complicated functions to students as the linguistic knowledge and the linguistic competence of learner increase. They should illustrate the discrepancy between the sentence pattern and the intended message of the sentence and should emphasize the distinction between the sentence pattern and the language function so that students will not rely only on the sentence structure but should interpret the hidden meaning of the sentence while communicating with others.

Apart from the seven functions of language, teachers should clearly illustrate the distinction between what the sentence says and what is the intention of the speaker. Julia Falk states in *Linguistic and Language* that in terms of semantics the sentence "Can you take out the garbage?" is a question whereas in terms of pragmatics or the real world, this sentence is an imperative (Falk, 1978: 263). Falk further points out that both semantic and pragmatic factors should be considered

and that actual utterance in particular circumstances should be focused (Falk, 1978: 264).

### 3. Language level

Teachers should possess the concept of language level in mind. The level of language or the varieties of language should be taught to students to promote successful communication. Mary Finocchiaro writes about the importance of the varieties of language in The Functional- Notional Approach. She states that the varieties of language may sometimes either obscure the message or render it totally appropriate and that language varieties are conditioned by three main factors: geographical factors, social factors including social classes, status in the community and educational background, and "register" (Finocchiaro, 1983: 24) which is the situational dialect, style (Fromkin, 1998: 425) and the variation of language in terms of formality or the informality of the situation, the topic, work or activities under discussion and the mode-oral or written of the discourse. (Finocchiaro, 1983: 24 -25)

According to Martin Joos, there are five shades of informality and formality in speech and in writing ranging from casual or colloquial to frozen as follows:

- Formal: in most writing and in giving public reports
- Informal: the private, conversational language used in daily communication and in personal letters
- Polite: with people one doesn't know well or people on different levels in terms of age or social position
- Familiar: with people one knows intimately
- Tentative: tactful language to avoid arguments or embarrassing disagreements (Finocchiaro, 1983: 25).

Teachers can convey the concept of the levels or the styles of language by making a comparison between English and the target language, Thai, since Thai also possesses the concept of the language level. Status and respect as expressed in Thai are far more significant than they would in English (Foley, 2005: 228). According to Fromkin, Thai possesses the elaborate code of style usage. For example, speakers of Thai use kin "eat" to their intimates, informally or in more formal situations when talking about animals. Thaan "eat" is used informally with strangers. Rabprathan "eat" is used in formal occasion or when conversing with esteemed persons. Chan "eat" is used when referring to Buddhist monks (Fromkin, 1998: 426). Moreover, teachers should point out the differences of the language level between the spoken and the written language to students.

### 4. Functional-Notional Syllabus

One of the most appropriate syllabus that promotes successful communication and relates to the concept of pragmatics is the functional-notional syllabus. Teachers consequently should adopt this kind of syllabus in teaching speaking. Peter Hubbard states in A Training Course in TEFL that the functional - notional syllabus is an arrangement of "pieces of language", but these pieces are not the language forms: they are functions and notions" (Hubbard, 1995: 242). According to Penny Ur, a function is some kinds of communicative act and the use of language to achieve a purpose usually involving interaction between at least two people such as suggesting, apologizing and greeting whereas a notion is an idea or concept in language like time, size, emotion and movement (Ur, 1996: 92).

According to Peter Hubbard, the functional-notional syllabus can promote students' communicational

effectiveness. It can make students aware of the need for appropriate language in a given situation. It enhances the students' motivation since the content is relevant to the learners' need. However, in the functional-notional syllabus, students must learn the grammar of the language as well. The functional notional syllabus therefore makes the task of both students and teachers much harder since its focus is on the subtler uses of language. It may be very confusing for students (Hubbard, 1995: 247).

### 5. Practice Activity

The appropriate language activity that teachers should adopt in the speaking class should relate to the concept of pragmatics and should promote how to use the language in the real world. Widdowson states in *Learning Purpose and Language Use* that if language is to be taught for communication, it has to be presented as communication and that every classroom activity must bear the hallmark of "authenticity" (Widdowson, 1983: 30). According to Murcia, the classroom activities should move away from repetition or memorization toward a freer expression of the student's own knowledge and ideas. To create a pure and authentic communication, a free conversation among students in the class would be focused (Murcia, 1979: 21). Penny Ur points out in *A Training Course in TEFL* that after the free practice stage that students have been encouraged to produce the new pattern freely and meaningfully, the next stage is to introduce a practice activity that students have an opportunity to use their newly acquired language for a purpose (Ur, 1996: 250). In *A Course in Language Teaching*, Penny Ur points out four characteristics of a successful speaking activity as follows:

- Learners talk a lot. The activity is occupied by learner's talk.
- Participants are even. All learners get a chance

to speak.

- Motivation is high. Learners are eager to speak because of interesting topics and the desire to achieve a task's objectives.
- Language is of an acceptable level. Learners utter sentences that are easily comprehensible and of an acceptable level of language accuracy (Ur, 1996: 120).

In addition, role playing can be used in teaching speaking to promote the successful and effective communication as well. Role playing is a drama-like classroom activity in which students take the roles of different participants in a situation and act out what might typically happen in that situation (Richards, 1999: 318). According to Haycraft, role playing or acting out dialogue is valuable since it gets students speaking expressively in a situation (Haycraft, 1995: 89). In addition, role playing is useful to encourage thinking and creativity, to let students develop and practice new language and behavioral skills in a relatively non-threatening setting, and to create the motivation and involvement necessary for learning to occur (Tompkins, 1998: 1).

### 6. Communicative Language Teaching

The teacher who wants to use pragmatics as guidelines in teaching speaking should adopt the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) or communicative approaches. This is partly because the Communicative Language Teaching and communicative approaches have several concepts and principles relating to pragmatics. As Diane Larsen Freeman states the principles of the Communicative Language Teaching in *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching* that: "Students need the knowledge of linguistic forms, meanings and functions. They need to know that many different forms can be used to perform a function and

also that a single form can often serve a variety of functions. Students must be able to choose from among these the most appropriate form, given the social context and the roles of the interlocutors" (Freeman, 1986: 131).

Jack C. Richards states in Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics that the goal of foreign or second language learning in Communicative Language Teaching is communicative competence (Richards, 1999: 65). According to Brown, the communicative competence enables a person to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings within specific contexts. It is different from linguistic competence in the sense that linguistic competence is the knowledge "about" language forms whereas communicative competence is the knowledge that enables a person to communicate functionally and interactively (Brown, 1994: 227). In other words, communicative competence is "the ability not only to apply the grammatical rules of a language in order to form grammatically correct sentences but also to know when and where to use these sentences and to whom" (Richards, 1999: 65).

According to Maley, the communicative approaches are motivating, so students tend to put more efforts into them. They equip the learner with appropriate skills for using the language in the real world. They offer the learners the opportunity of using the language for their own purposes earlier than do other approaches. They are more likely to produce the four kinds of competence: grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence- than more purely language centered approaches (Maley, 1986: 90).

## Conclusion

Although Thai students normally start learning English since they were young, they still have difficulties in communication in English, especially in the productive skills as speaking. Teaching English in Thailand in the past has been focused on form. Thai students may possess language competence and lexical competence. However, they may not be able to effectively communicate with foreigners unless they take how languages is used into consideration. Pragmatics consequently should be applied as an effective and useful tool in teaching speaking so that language learners develop pragmatic competence, possess communicative competence and are aware of language functions and language levels to create the communicational effectiveness. In addition, the findings of this study can have potential implications for language teaching. Clearly the understanding of teachers plays a crucial role in how a foreign language is learned. A deeper understanding of the concept and the importance of pragmatics could allow language teachers and teacher educators to better accommodate any useful innovations in the classroom-teaching techniques, learning techniques and materials. Pragmatics is not limited only to speaking. It can be applied in teaching other language skills, especially the writing skill in which the level and the function of language play a very crucial role.

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