



Language Impairment: Understanding Pragmatics

Est. Time: 15-30 Minutes

Objective

To understand how a language disorder can affect a student's social interactions.

Overview

Language is complicated. Many rules must be applied correctly if effective communication is to occur. A student with a language disorder has difficulty mastering these rules, which can lead to communication breakdowns. Students with language disorders may have difficulty with *receptive* and *expressive* language, as well as with *pragmatics*.

The term pragmatics refers to the appropriate use of language in social contexts. Students with language disorders may have trouble with language-based social interactions. Consider the following examples.

Example A

Two six-year-olds are playing a game on the playground when a third child approaches them and says, "That looks fun!" and is invited to join the game. A fourth child also asks, "Can I play?" and, once given approval, joins the game. However, though six-year-old Lela likewise wants to join the game, she is uncertain how to approach the others to initiate an interaction. She wanders around the general vicinity where the children are playing, approaches them several times, but walks away without saying anything. Finally, she joins in the game without asking. Although the others let her play, they are uncomfortable because she did not follow the normal social conventions.

Example B

Eleven-year-old Libby has trouble following conversational rules. She approaches a group of classmates in the hallway and says, "Hey Abigail, guess what?" Abigail, who was already in a conversation with someone else, does not hear her and continues talking with her friend. Libby does not pick up on this social cue and instead proceeds to tell Abigail about her weekend, even though Abigail is still talking. When Abigail does acknowledge Libby and starts talking to her, the conversation breaks down further. Libby responds to some of Abigail's comments with remarks that are not relevant to the conversation. She doesn't allow the usual give-and-take, instead taking longer conversational turns, and often talks at the same time Abigail does.



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Overview [Cont.]

In frustration, Abigail finally says, “Libby, you never listen to anything I say!” and walks away. Other girls who witness the scene agree that Libby is frustrating to talk to and decide amongst themselves that she is “weird.”

Example C

Sixteen-year-old Eric is known as a clown among his classmates. They think he’s funny because he often pretends not to understand what people are telling him to do, instead doing something entirely different. As his class is filing into the library one afternoon, Eric stops outside the door and says, “Oh, no. I’ve got gum. I need to toss it before the librarian sees me.” (Note: The librarian is a real stickler when enforcing her No-Gum-Near-the-Books Policy). As students give him various suggestions to throw it away, stick it under one of the tables, or keep it in his mouth but don’t chew it, his friend Anthony says sarcastically, “Nah...you should just wait until she’s in the middle of explaining something to us and then blow a huge bubble right in front of her and see what she does!” Another student adds, “And then pop it really loudly!” The other students laugh, adding comments like, “Yeah, I’m sure she’d love that!” However, once class starts, they are all surprised when Eric really does blow a huge bubble and pop it while the librarian is talking. The librarian, true to her reputation, gives him five demerits and assigns him to after-school book-shelving duty for a week. Eric is surprised that the librarian did not “love it” like his friends said she would, and that they would encourage him to do something that would get him in trouble.

Questions/Discussion Topics

1. What should Lela have done in order to join the girls’ game? What pragmatics skills does she need to develop?
2. What social cues did Libby fail to recognize? How did this affect her conversation with Abigail?
3. How did Erik misinterpret his classmates’ social language? Does this have any bearing on his status as the class clown? Why or why not?
4. For all three students, explain how their peers’ perceptions of them could be negatively affected because of their language disorder.
5. As a teacher, what suggestions do you have to improve their pragmatics skills? Is there anything you can do to lessen the negative perceptions that their peers may develop?