



Essential Strategies for Teaching Pragmatic Language Skills

Whether conducting a structured lesson or having students work independently in small groups, these five teaching strategies are effective in helping students with a pragmatic language disorder learn social communication skills. The key to success is to use these strategies consistently over time.

Essential Teaching Strategies

- √ *Provide immediate, specific feedback*
- √ *Model appropriate skills*
- √ *Create a script*
- √ *Provide opportunities for practice*
- √ *Facilitate self evaluations*
- √ *Facilitate peer evaluations*
- √ *Avoid Humor and Sarcasm*

Provide Immediate, Specific, Concrete Feedback

Educators often hear the words “teachable moments” – real-life situations that can be appropriated to teach children certain skills. When a student with a pragmatic language disorder encounters a difficult social situation, it is important that teachers take advantage of these moments to provide immediate, concrete, specific feedback. Because students with a pragmatic language disorder often have auditory processing difficulties, keep the feedback brief and specific. Giving too much information or extraneous detail only adds confusion.. The best strategy is to explain: 1) what happened; 2) why it was inappropriate; and 3) what the student can do differently next time to achieve a better outcome.

For example, imagine that a student, Jacob, enters the classroom and immediately starts talking to the teacher about last night’s homework. He does not greet the teacher or appropriately initiate the conversation appropriately. This is a teachable moment. The teacher could provide Jacob with immediate and specific feedback following the three-step model described above. He might say: “Excuse me, John. You just came into the classroom and began asking questions about homework before you said hello to me, or found out if I had time to speak with you. When you do this to someone, they might think you are rude and get angry. Next time you come in, it would help me if you would say my name when you start talking to me. This lets me know that you are speaking to me. You could say, ‘Good morning, Mr. Camillo. May I talk to you about last night’s homework.’”



Teachers often express concern about embarrassing or pointing out a particular student. The solution is to use common sense and professional judgment to distinguish teachable moments that are appropriate opportunities for feedback from those that are not. It takes some experience to know when and how to help a student with a social skill. In the example above, providing immediate feedback is clearly appropriate. However, if a line of students was standing at the teacher's desk, it would not have been the right time to intervene.

Model Appropriate Skills

Both teachers and parents can take the initiative to model appropriate skills consistently at every opportunity. An effective approach is to isolate a particular skill and emphasize its development over time. For example, if Jacob is working on using greetings appropriately, make a point of greeting him *every day*. When he is successful greeting people, let him know!

Create a Script

Scripting provides the *exact* words to use in a particular situation. We often take for granted that students possess the skills to get what they need or want. How could a child not know how to ask to join a game of kickball or borrow a pencil? In kickball, a child might think she can only join in at the beginning of the game. She doesn't know the right timing or what words to use to join a game in progress. Similarly, a student who forgets his pencil might go through an entire class without writing because he doesn't know when or how to ask to borrow one. He then doesn't do the written work and is in trouble at the end of class. When the teacher confronts him and he says "But I didn't have a pencil," she responds, "You should have asked for one."

We must keep in mind that students with a pragmatic language disorder may have trouble formulating questions and knowing when to ask them. Further, these students may have poor problem-solving skills and strictly adhere to rules. For example, if the teacher's rule is that everyone must bring a pencil to class, a student with a pragmatic language disorder might not realize it is acceptable to ask to borrow one.

Having a script to follow can help students navigate real situations. First, they need to know that they can ask for what they want or need, and that there are appropriate ways



to do it. In the example above, the student can be told that it is acceptable to borrow a pencil for class. The next step is to help him identify when to ask for what he needs, such as when class is starting and students are taking out their homework. The final step is to provide him with the exact words to use: “Excuse me, Ms. Gross. I left my pencil in my last class. May I please borrow one?”

Provide Opportunities for Practice

Practice and repetition are essential to developing social communication skills in students with pragmatic language deficits. The goal is for students to generalize skills to different situations (i.e., to achieve carryover). For example, a student might make appropriate eye contact one day when meeting a new teacher, then make poor eye contact the next day when meeting a new student. The more practice and feedback teachers and parents provide in varying contexts, the better students will be able to carry over skills.

Teachers and parents can work together so students can practice particular skills at home. It’s best for teachers to give parents specific instructions. For example, if a student is working on phone skills, the teacher can ask the parents to let the child order pizza on the phone. To develop proximity skills, the teacher might ask parents to remind the child to maintain an appropriate distance from others when standing in line at the grocery checkout.

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Facilitate Self-Evaluation

Teach students to monitor their own social interactions. It is important for them to self-evaluate periodically. This can be done informally, such as with basic self-talk techniques (e.g., “Did I take a conversational turn?” and “Did the listener understand what I said?”). It can also be accomplished with a formal checklist, such as the one on the following page.