

Effect of Form-Focused Pragmatic Instruction on Development of Pragmatic Comprehension: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

Optimal comprehension of pragmatically implied meaning of written and spoken target language expressions is best attained when language learners learn the pragmatic rules conditioning target language use. Developing language learners' target language pragmatic knowledge, accordingly, requires directing their attention and awareness toward noticing the pragmatic rules of the target language. To develop a conceptual framework for the effect of awareness-raising instruction on developing language learners' pragmatic comprehension ability, the current review paper provided a detailed elaboration on the underpinning theories and variables involved in awareness-raising instruction and pragmatic comprehension ability. The theories and variables elaborated include relevance theory, noticing hypothesis, and form-focused instruction. The interaction and relationship between these theories and variables formed the conceptual framework of the current review paper.

Keywords: Form-Focused Instruction, Pragmatic Comprehension, Noticing Hypothesis, Relevance Theory

1. Introduction

A speaker's intended meaning cannot be merely derived from syntax and semantics. Semantics studies the conventional or literal meanings of expressions (what is said) whereas pragmatics studies the way speakers use context and shared information to convey information which supplements the semantic content of the expressions (what is meant). Therefore, comprehending semantically incomplete expressions requires supplementing them with pragmatics (Bianchi, 2004; Holtgraves & Kashima, 2008; Bahaa-eddin, 2011). This implies that in order to communicate accurately as well as appropriately, language learners need to learn the pragmatic rules of the target language besides the grammatical rules. This is

of crucial importance since according to Bachman's (1990) model of communicative competence, pragmatic competence and grammatical competence are two distinct aspects of communicative competence. Hence, a high level of grammatical competence does not lead to a high level of pragmatic competence and even language learners at the advanced levels of language proficiency cannot achieve a native-like communicative competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 1998; Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Barron, 2003; Liu, 2006; Rose, 2005; Gharaghani et al., 2011).

This is attributed to the fact that there are noticeable differences between sociolinguistic aspects of the target language and the language learners' heritage language (Alptekin, 2002). As the pragmatic perspectives of the target language are not often salient for language learners, mere exposure to these pragmatic perspectives does not help language learners to notice them (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Consequently, many aspects of target language pragmatics either are not learned or are learned very slowly (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). Understanding these culture specific expressions requires directing language learners' attention to the sociopragmatic as well as pragmalinguistic features of the target language. In fact, learning without attention and awareness is impossible and in order to acquire target language pragmatics, language learners must notice both the linguistic forms of target language utterances and associated social and contextual features (Schmidt, 2001). Therefore, some sorts of awareness-raising instruction, either in the form of explicit Focus on Forms or in the form of implicit Focus on Form, are advised by scholars in the area of interlanguage pragmatics in order to develop pragmatic competence in language learners (Kasper & Roever, 2005; Rose, 2005; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003).

2. Relevance Theory

The theory underpinning comprehension of pragmatically implied meaning of written and spoken target language expressions is relevance theory. The theory deals with the contextual effects which a text or an utterance yields and the processing effort which the readers or hearers need to make in order to comprehend the text or the utterance. To get the concept of the theory, a series of terms including "cognitive environment" and "context" need to be defined. Based on the concept of the theory, then, pragmatic comprehension is categorized into various levels.

2.1 Cognitive Environment

A person's cognitive environment is "a set of facts that are manifest to him" (Sperber & Wilson, 1995:39). In other words, it is a set of facts that a person is able to perceive or infer. Cognitive environment refers to the person's physical environment and cognitive capabilities. It includes both a set of facts that he or she is aware of as well as a set of facts that he or she is able to be aware of (Zixia, 2009).

2.2 Context

The context of an utterance is "the set of premises used in interpreting it. A context is the psychological construct, a subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world" (Sperber & Wilson, 1995:15). The notion of context is not restricted to the external physical factors,

cultural factors, situational circumstances, or immediate preceding text or utterances. It involves the hearer's or reader's cognitive environment which can be used in interpreting a text or an utterance (Zhonggang, 2006). Therefore, "context" is not "given", but is "selected" (p.132), and "the selection of a particular context is determined by the search for relevance" (p. 141).

Successful communication depends on the potential context which is mutually shared by the communicator and the addressee. In other words, communication is successful when the intention of communicator meets with the expectation of the addressee (Zhonggang, 2006). Hence, "a crucial part of the context is the audience's expectations" (Gutt, 1996:240). To make a text or an utterance optimally relevant to its reader or hearer, certain contextual implications need to be considered (Gutt, 1996).

2.3 Principle of Relevance

Relevance theory was developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in their effort to reveal the process of human communication in their book "Relevance: Cognition and Communication" published in 1986. This theory is concerned with two general principles: Cognitive Principle of Relevance and Communicative Principle of Relevance (Wilson, 2004).

The cognitive principle of relevance states that everything else being equal, the greater the positive cognitive effects (contextual effects) achieved by the audience, the greater the relevance of the input to the person processing it. However; everything else being equal, the smaller the processing effort required by the audience to obtain these effects, the greater the relevance of the input to the person processing it (Wilson, 2004).

Contextual effect in a person's "cognitive environment" has not been brought about either through new information in the utterance alone or the context alone. A mixture of both the new information and the context has instigated it. Contextual effects are obtained through the interaction of the new information with a context of existing assumption in one of the following four ways: through strengthening the existing assumption, through contradicting and eliminating the existing assumption, through weakening the existing assumption, or through combining with the existing assumption to produce a contextual implication (Zhonggang, 2006).

The communicative principle of relevance states that human communication creates an expectation of optimal relevance on the part of the audience that his or her attempt at interpretation will yield adequate contextual effect at minimal processing effort (Zixia, 2009). According to Sperber and Wilson (1995) this expectation is part of human psychology and is described as principle of relevance: "every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance (p.158).

2.4 Consistency with the Principle of Relevance

"An utterance, on a given interpretation, is consistent with the principle of relevance if and only if the speaker might reasonably have expected it to be optimally relevant to the hearer on that interpretation" (Wilson & Sperber, 1993: 287). In other words, the interpretation

conveyed by the communicator is assumed by the addressee to be the first interpretation which a rational communicator might have expected to bring the addressee sufficient contextual effects without costing him or her any unnecessary processing effort to attain the contextual effects in the interpretation intended by the communicator (Zhonggang, 2006). According to Sperber and Wilson (1995) such an interpretation is consistent with the principle of relevance.

2.5 Levels of Relevance

Relevance is a graded notion. It depends on the interaction between contextual effects and processing effort. The degree of relevance obtained by an audience varies depending on the amount of contextual effects produced by the text or utterance and the processing effort cost by the text or utterance. The more contextual effects a text or an utterance gives, the more relevant it is; the less processing effort the reader or hearer makes, the more relevant the text or utterance is. Relevance is classified into four levels: optimal relevance, strong relevance, weak relevance, and irrelevance (Zhonggang, 2006).

Table1. Levels of Relevance

Relevance	Contextual Implication	Processing Effort
Optimal Relevance	Fully Comprehensible	Without Unnecessary Effort
Strong Relevance	Relatively Clear	With Some Necessary Effort
Weak Relevance	Implied	Considerable Effort Taken
Irrelevance	Vague and Unclear	All the Effort in Vain

2.6 Descriptive and Interpretive Language Use

Relevance theory distinguishes between descriptive and interpretive language use. In the descriptive use, the thought belongs to the communicator who intends to represent the reality in an appropriate manner. In the interpretive use, on the contrary, the thought belongs to a person other than the communicator. Hence, the communicator intends his or her message or utterance to represent the original thought in an appropriate manner. A person who communicates descriptively intends to be faithful to the reality whereas a person who communicates interpretively intends to be faithful to the meaning of the original communicator (Smith, 2000).

2.7 Explicatures and Implicatures

According to relevance theory, the assumptions the communicator intends to express can be conveyed in two different ways: as explicatures or as implicatures. Explicatures are a subset of assumptions that are analytically implied by a text or an utterance; more specifically, explicatures are those analytic implications which the communicator intended to express. Implicatures are a subset of the contextual assumptions and contextual implications of an utterance or a text which the communicator intended to convey. Both explicatures and implicatures are recognized by the audience based on consistency with the principle of relevance (Gutt, 1989).

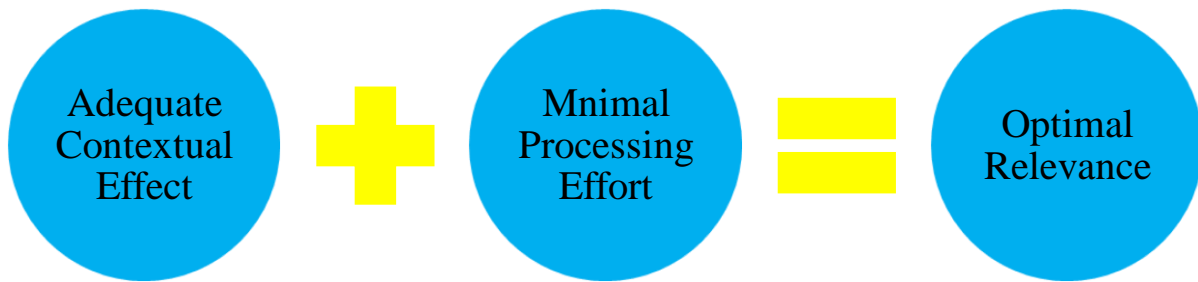


Figure 1: Relevance Theory

3. Noticing Hypothesis

The theory underpinning the effect of instruction on understanding and comprehending target language pragmatic features is noticing hypothesis. This theory deals with the influential role of attention to and awareness of target language pragmatic features in understanding and comprehending target language pragmatic features.

3.1 Levels of Consciousness

Schmidt (1990) distinguishes three senses of consciousness in second language acquisition: consciousness as awareness, consciousness as intention, and consciousness as knowledge.

Consciousness as awareness has various levels, but three levels of awareness were considered crucial. The first level is “perception” which “implies mental organization and the ability to create internal representations of external events” (p.132). For instance; when reading, a person is aware of (notices) the content of the text, rather than the writer’s style or the background noise outside the room. Nevertheless, he or she perceives the competing stimuli and may or may not choose to pay attention to them. The second level is “noticing” which “identifies the level at which stimuli are subjectively experienced. Thus, refers to private experience. It is the basic sense in which we commonly say that we are aware of something, but does not exhaust the possibilities” (p.132). The third level is “understanding” in which an individual can analyze and compare some aspect of the environment that he or she noticed with what he or she has noticed on other occasions. At this level, he or she is able to think about the objects of consciousness and try to comprehend their importance. Problem solving and metacognitions (awareness of awareness) belong to this level.

Schmidt (1995) makes a distinction between noticing and understanding. “Noticing means registering the simple occurrence of some event, whereas understanding implies recognition of a general principle, rule, or pattern. Noticing is crucially related to the question of what linguistic material is stored in memory; understanding relates to questions concerning how that material is organized into a linguistic system” (p.26).

With respect to consciousness as intention, Schmidt (1990) states that “the most common ambiguity in use of the term consciousness is between passive awareness and active intent. When we say that we have done something consciously, we often mean that we did it intentionally” (p.133). He also distinguishes consciousness as awareness from consciousness as intention. He states intention may be either conscious or unconscious, and we often

become aware of things we do not intend to notice.

With respect to consciousness as knowledge, various distinctions between conscious knowledge and unconscious knowledge have been suggested. One distinction between the knowledge types is between explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge. The distinction between explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge in target language acquisition represents a continuum. Every point on this continuum to distinguish explicit knowledge from implicit knowledge determines the degree to which target language knowledge is considered to be conscious or unconscious. However, a review of literature shows that there is no consensus on where the line needs to be drawn. The other distinction between the knowledge types is between declarative knowledge which entails the knowledge of “facts” and procedural knowledge which entails the knowledge of “how” (Schmidt, 1990).

3.2 Concept of Noticing Hypothesis

Noticing hypothesis challenges Krashen’s (1985) input hypothesis which postulates comprehensible input, defined as input slightly beyond the learner’s current level of competence, is the sufficient condition for language acquisition to take place.

Noticing is a crucial cognitive construct in target language acquisition. “The orthodox position in psychology is that there is little if any learning without attention” (Schmidt, 2001:11). Noticing hypothesis states that “people learn about the things that they attend to and do not learn much about the things they do not attend to” (Schmidt, 2001:30). Schmidt (1995) claims that in order for the input to become intake, the detection of input in the form of awareness and attention is necessary. Not all input has equal value and only that input which is noticed then becomes available for intake and effective processing (Schmidt, 1990; 2001). Intake is part of the input which is being paid attention to and is taken into short-term memory and consequently is integrated into the interlanguage, a language independent from both the language learner’s native language and the target language (Selinker, 1972).

3.3 Versions of Noticing Hypothesis

Noticing hypothesis has both strong and weak versions. The strong version which was proposed in 1990 claims that noticing is a necessary and sufficient condition for target language acquisition to occur. On the contrary, the weak version which was proposed in 2001 claims that noticing is a necessary but not sufficient condition for target language acquisition to occur. However; in both strong version and weak version, noticing is considered to play a crucial role in target language acquisition (Uggen, 2012).

3.4 Types of Noticing

Two types of noticing are the required conditions in order for language acquisition to take place: “noticing the form” and “noticing the gap”. In “noticing the form”; attention to linguistic features of the input, without which “input” cannot be turned into “intake”, is required. In “noticing the gap”, a comparison must be made between the target language system which is available as input and the language learner’s current state of his or her developing linguistic system which is realized in his or her output (Schmidt & Frota, 1986).

3.5 Schmidt's Own Experience

Schmidt and Frota (1986) illustrated their claim posited in noticing hypothesis through the analysis of Schmidt's own experience of learning Portuguese. Through reviewing his reflective journals during Portuguese course, Schmidt realized that certain linguistic features which he noticed during class instructions were integrated into his interlanguage system.

3.6 Factors Contributing to Noticing

Schmidt (1990:143) highlights five features as factors contributing to noticing while processing target language input. These factors consist of expectations, frequency, perceptual salience, skill level, and task demands.

With respect to expectations, instruction can play a significant role in helping language learners to notice target language features through the establishment of expectations about language (Schmidt, 1990). Instruction is able to direct language learners' attention to items which they do not expect and as a result they might not notice (Ellis, 1997).

With respect to frequency, items which are used more frequently have higher possibility of being noticed. Language features which appear in input more frequently, through repeated instruction, have higher possibility of being noticed and integrated into language learners' interlanguage system (Schmidt, 1990).

With respect to perceptual salience, phonologically reduced morphemes which are ambiguous such as bound, contracted, asyllabic, or unstressed forms are troublesome for target language learners and are less probable to be noticed (Schmidt, 1990).

With respect to skill level, acquiring new target language features requires routinizing the skills which were learned previously. This is concerned with the language learners' ability to process new items which they notice in input as well as their ability to pay attention to both form and meaning in processing target language input. Noticing capability differs in different people (Schmidt, 1990).

Task demands refer to the way the task forces language learners to notice certain target language features to perform the task (Schmidt, 1990). Some certain language features might be made salient intentionally or the task might be designed to stimulate language learners to process the language. In any case, the level of noticing may be determined through the level of processing (Ellis, 1997).

3.7 Explicit versus Implicit Learning

Schmidt (1995) makes a distinction between the concepts of implicit learning and explicit learning which are both related to consciousness at the level of awareness.

“Implicit learning refers to unconscious generalization from examples. It is viewed as a natural product of attending to structured input. There is a consensus that the mechanisms of implicit learning probably involve the strengthening and weakening of connections between nodes in complex networks as the result of experience, rather than through the unconscious induction of rules abstracted from data” (Schmidt, 1995: 26). “Explicit learning, that is,

conscious problem solving, relies on different mechanisms, including attempts to form mental representations, searching memory for related knowledge and forming and testing hypothesis” (Schmidt, 1995: 27).

Both explicit learning and implicit learning have their own strengths. Implicit learning is more suitable for “the learning of fuzzy patterns based on perceptual similarities and the detection of nonsalient covariance between variables” (Schmidt, 1995: 27). Explicit learning, on the other hand, is more suitable “when a domain contains rules that are based on logical relationships rather than perceptual similarities” (Schmidt, 1995: 27).



Figure 2: Noticing Hypothesis

4. Form-Focused Instruction

Form-focused instruction is a cover term for two major types of instruction including Focus on Form instruction and Focus on Forms instruction. To get the concept of the methods involved in each type of instruction, a distinction is made between the two instruction types involved and then various subdivisions of Focus on Form instruction are elaborated.

4.1 Focus on Form versus Focus on Forms

There are two types of form-focused instruction: Focus on Forms and Focus on Form. Focus on Forms is corresponding to the traditional teaching of discrete linguistic structures in separate lessons and in a sequence which has been determined by syllabus designers (Long, 1991). Focus on Form, on the other hand, “overtly draws language learners’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication” (Long, 1991:45-46). In other words, Focus on Forms uses explicit awareness raising activities whereas Focus on Form incidentally directs language learners’ attention to target language forms (Dastjerdi & Rezvani, 2010).

In a Focus on Forms approach, language learners view themselves as learners of a language and the language as the object of study whereas in Focus on Form, language learners view themselves as language users and language is viewed as a tool for communication (Ellis, 2001). Looking up unknown words in a dictionary during a group discussion or a reading task is an instance of Focus on Form instruction method because doing the task needs familiarity with the words which are involved. Directing language learners’ attention to unknown words during a non-communicative, non-authentic task such as word match or fill in the blank is an instance of Focus on Forms instruction method because discrete lexical items are taught as

objects of the study not as tools for language use (Laufer & Girsai, 2008).

The fundamental assumption of Focus on Form instruction method is that classroom activities are required to be on the basis of communicative tasks. However, Focus on Forms instruction method postulates that language cannot be learned effectively as a by-product of communicative tasks rather suggests a skills-learning approach which comprises three stages: The first stage is providing understanding of the grammar through a variety of means including: explanation in the first language, mentioning the differences between the first language and the target language, and aural comprehension activities which are intended to focus language learners' attention on the forms being used. The second stage includes written and oral exercises that involve using the grammar in both communicative and non-communicative activities. The third stage is providing frequent opportunities for communicative use of the grammar to promote automatic and accurate use (Sheen, 2003).

4.2 Types of Focus on Form

Two types of Focus on Form instruction can be distinguished: planned Focus on Form and incidental Focus on Form. Planned Focus on Form involves the use of focused tasks, that is, communicative tasks that have been designed to elicit the use of a certain linguistic form in the context of meaning-centered language use. In this case, the Focus on Form is pre-determined. This type of Focus on Form instruction is similar to Focus on Forms instruction in which a certain form is pre-selected for treatment but it differs from it in two ways: Firstly, the attention to form takes place in interaction where the primary focus is on meaning; Secondly, language learners are not made aware that a certain form is being taught and therefore are supposed to function primarily as “language users” rather than as “language learners” while they are doing the task (Ellis et al., 2002). Input enhancement and input flood are two types of planned Focus on Form. An example of a planned Focus on Form task is a reading comprehension task flooded with a specific grammatical feature for the learners to pick up (Sarkhosh et al., 2012). Incidental Focus on Form involves the use of unfocused tasks, that is, communicative tasks which have been designed to elicit general samples of the language rather than certain forms. Such tasks can be done without any attention to form. However, the language learners and the teacher may decide to incidentally pay attention to various forms while doing the task. In this case, attention to form will be extensive rather than intensive, that is, various forms are likely to be treated briefly rather than a single form being addressed frequently. An example of an incidental Focus on Form task is an information gap task in which the teacher corrects language learners' mistakes or language learners might ask the teacher the meaning of unknown words (Ellis et al., 2002).

Focus on Form instruction can be further divided into two types: reactive Focus on Form and preemptive (proactive) Focus on Form. Reactive Focus on Form takes place when a language learner makes a mistake which is then corrected by the teacher or another language learner. The mistake can be addressed explicitly by mentioning directly what the mistake is or by providing him or her with the meta-lingual information related to the correct form. The mistake can be also addressed implicitly through recast. Preemptive (proactive) Focus on Form involves the attempt by the teacher or a language learner to initiate attention to

problematic linguistic items although no mistake has occurred (Marzban & Mokhberi, 2012).

Based on the degree of overtness or obtrusiveness, the degree to which the attention to form interrupts the flow of communication, Focus on Form instruction can be also divided into two types: explicit (obtrusive) and implicit (unobtrusive). Explicit (obtrusive) Focus on Form instruction is the type of instruction in which rules are explained to language learners or language learners are directed to discover the rules by paying attention to forms. Some examples of explicit (obtrusive) Focus on Form tasks include consciousness-raising tasks and garden path techniques. Implicit (unobtrusive) Focus on Form instruction, on the other hand, makes no overt reference to rules or forms. Input enhancement and input flood are the techniques used in implicit (unobtrusive) Focus on Form instruction (DeKeyser, 1995; Doughty, 2003; Norris & Ortega, 2000).

5. Conceptual Framework

A total of three variables are involved in designing the concept of the current review paper. These three variables consist of level of pragmatic comprehension, general effect of pragmatic instruction, and finally effect of pragmatic instruction type. The interaction among these variables results in determining the effect of form-focused pragmatic instruction on the development of pragmatic comprehension.

The theory underlying pragmatic comprehension is relevance theory. According to this theory, depending on the amount of contextual cues available to the listener or reader of the message and the amount of effort required to process the message by the listener or reader of the message, pragmatic comprehension can obtain a degree of relevance ranging from irrelevance, weak relevance, strong relevance, to optimal relevance.

The theory underlying the effect of instruction is noticing hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, the type of instruction which attracts language learners' attention and awareness to notice target language pragmatic features will have greater effect on developing language learners' pragmatic comprehension. The reason is that noticing input through consciousness-raising instruction helps input which language learners receive to be turned into intake for them to learn. Therefore, noticing is the prerequisite for learning.

The types of instruction involved in developing pragmatic comprehension in language learners consist of Focus on Form pragmatic instruction and Focus on Forms pragmatic instruction. Determining pragmatic comprehension level into four levels ranging from poor comprehension, weak comprehension, strong comprehension, to optimal comprehension based on the principle of relevance helps realizing the effect of pragmatic instruction in general and in particular.

In general the comparison between the gains obtained prior to pragmatic consciousness-raising activities and the gains obtained after instruction of pragmatic rules of the target language either through Focus on Form or through Focus on Forms instruction can reveal the effect of pragmatic instruction. In particular the comparison between the gains obtained by the language learners receiving Focus on Form pragmatic instruction and the gains obtained by the language learners receiving Focus on Forms pragmatic instruction can

reveal the effectiveness of specific types of pragmatic instruction.

Identification of the general effect of pragmatic instruction as well as the effectiveness of specific type of pragmatic instruction can determine the crucial role of form-focused pragmatic instruction either using Focus on Form techniques or using Focus on Forms techniques on the development of pragmatic comprehension ability in language learners.

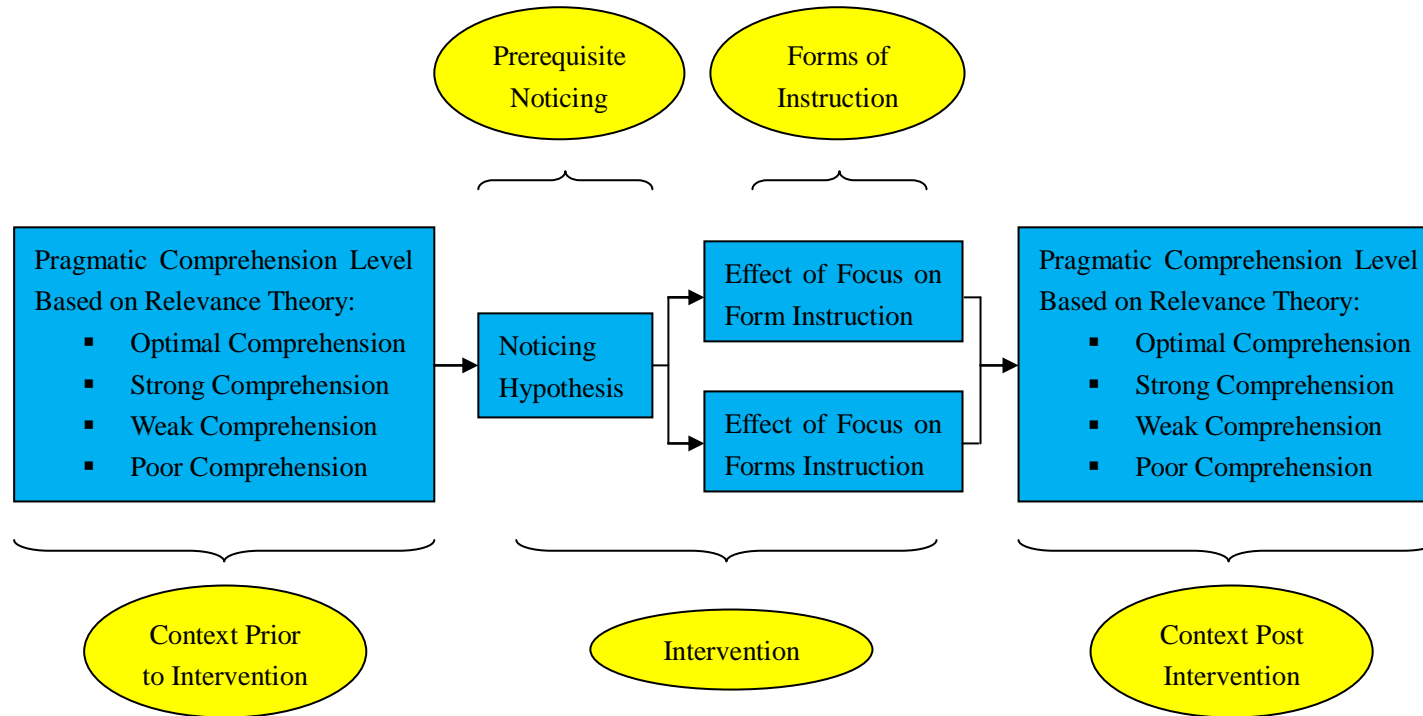


Figure 3: Conceptual Framework

6. Conclusion

The review paper presented a detailed elaboration on theories and variables underlying the effect of form-focused pragmatic instruction on developing pragmatic comprehension in language learners. Relevance theory was elaborated as the theoretical underpinning of pragmatic comprehension ability based on which comprehension of pragmatically implied meanings could occur at four levels ranging from poor, weak, strong, to optimal. Noticing hypothesis was elaborated as the theoretical underpinning of the effect of instruction on drawing language learners' attention and awareness to noticing target language pragmatic features. Finally, form-focused instruction was elaborated as a cover term for the two instructional types involved including Focus on Form and Focus on Forms. The presumed interrelationships among the main things to be studied — the key factors, variables, or constructs — formed the conceptual framework of the current review paper.

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