

Teaching Pragmatics via Video

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The following is a description of a yearlong pilot research project into the effectiveness of video-edited materials for the instruction of a variety of speech acts, with the ultimate goal of raising student awareness of both the sociopragmatic elements and pragmalinguistic forms found within on-going conversations presented in video form. A compilation of video-edited clips, taken from a variety of English-medium films and television shows and averaging 12 seconds in length, formed the basis of video input for a series of beginning to lower intermediate English communication courses at a Japanese women's university. Research was conducted through the use of a multi-group pretest/posttest design in which one set of courses were instructed on 5 speech acts, the other set on 5 different speech acts. Preliminary analysis reveals learner gains in speech act awareness and production, as well as evidence of a potential hierarchy of difficulty among the 10 speech acts.

The present research follows from two views taken from research into the instruction, learning and development of pragmatics in a second language: 1) learning pragmatics is “the most difficult aspect of language to master in learning a second language” (Blum-Kulka and Sheffer, 1993: p. 219), and 2) “without some form of instruction, many aspects of pragmatic competence do not develop sufficiently” (Kasper 1997: p. 3). Research into interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) has characterized pragmatic knowledge as the ability to perceive relevant sociopragmatic information within social interaction and then apply it when making appropriate pragmalinguistic choices (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983). In other words, within communication things such as the social distance, age or rank, and gender of one's interlocutor informs a person of how to choose contextually relevant utterances. Whether one initiates a request by using “*I was wondering if you...*” or “*Can/Could you...*” depends, to a large extent, upon the social context and with whom one is speaking. Understanding socially appropriate linguistic behavior when speaking to individuals plays an integral part in one's communicative competence.

The difficulty for L2 learners lies in the fact that though they may attain proficient knowledge and ability in syntax and lexis, without proper instruction into the “linguistic strategies” (Brown and Levinson, 1987) employed by a speech community, there exists the potential for unintended and unsavory miscommunications. According to Kasper and Rose (2001), “[s]peech communities differ in their

assessment of speakers' and hearers' social distance and social power, their rights and obligations, and the degree of imposition involved in particular communicative acts" (p. 2). Linguistic competence, therefore, is defined not only as one's grammatical and lexical competence but also one's pragmatic competence. Moreover, these competencies are not inherently intertwined – meaning, L2 learners scoring high marks on instruments assessing lexical/grammaticality knowledge can not be assumed to possess an equally proficient knowledge and use of pragmatic routines (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001).

Regardless of how L2 learners fare in terms of standardized tests, what matters most in communication is the assessment interlocutors have for one another regarding what is and is not appropriate. In a telling explanation of this, Thomas (1982) states:

Grammatical errors may be irritating and impede communication, but at least as a rule, they are apparent in the surface structure, so that H [the hearer] is aware that an error has occurred. Once alerted to the fact that S [the speaker] is not fully grammatically competent, native speakers seem to have little difficulty in making allowances for it. Pragmatic failure, on the other hand, is rarely recognized as such by non-linguists. If a non-native speaker appears to speak fluently (i.e., is grammatically competent), a native speaker is likely to attribute his/her apparent impoliteness or unfriendliness, not to any linguistic deficiency, but to boorishness or ill-will. While grammatical error may reveal a speaker to be a less than proficient

language-user, pragmatic failure reflects badly on him/her as a *person* (p. 96-97; italics in original).

Traditionally, interaction generated from activities within L2 classrooms – either in small groups, pair work or in lock-step instruction - could be characterized as “message transfer”, in that participants work through either communicative tasks or activities (i.e., *one-way* or *two-way tasks*) providing information rather than engaging in interpersonal, phatic communication found within non-institutional conversations. The instruction of pragmatics, especially in terms of how competent speakers of a language use speech acts as linguistic resources to achieve conversational ends, has received little classroom attention when compared to other instructional methods aimed at teaching grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary.

Over the course of the past two decades the goal of communicative language teaching (CLT), both in the second (L2) and foreign language (FL) instructional contexts, has been on improving the communicative competence of learners in terms of their awareness and ability to perform pragmatic routines in the target language (TL). In this time textbook design has moved away from a Structural syllabus, in which sequenced grammatical patterns and discrete-point instruction and assessment underlie instructional decisions, to either Situational or Notional syllabi, both of which focus more on language learning for communication's sake rather than for linguistic competence. The primary means of input in these communicative instructional methods is the dialogue (e.g., in Situational syllabi dialogues cover topics such as *at a restaurant* or *traveling by train*). However, using a conversation analysis approach, Wong (2002) found

that textbook dialogues fail to mirror elements found within naturally occurring speech data. Further evidence reveals that few ES/FL publishers offer textbook approaches and materials on pragmatic instruction (Bouton, 1996).

Consequently, the role of appropriately introducing the instruction of pragmatic elements such as speech acts within the classroom context falls upon the shoulders of individual instructors. According to Kasper (1999), “[l]anguage teachers need a thorough understanding [of *sic*] what pragmatic ability comprises. Studies of pragmatic practices and the conditions for pragmatic success and failure are necessary in order to determine what learners have to learn. Inter-language pragmatic studies, including studies on pragmatic development and classroom research, will inform teachers what approaches to instruction in pragmatics are most effective” (p. 3). The present research reflects this need for more classroom-based research highlighting the instructional benefits of various approaches to the instruction of pragmatics.

Course Background and Instructional Methodology

In Spring 2004, two instructional treatments were applied to three English communication classes at a Japanese women’s university (two classes labeled by the university as *Oral English* and the other class as *Foreign Language Communication*). As general English classes, these 90-minute per week classes were open to students from a wide range of departments, from Education to Social Welfare, History to Nutrition. The stated goal of the courses was to raise students’ awareness of a variety of speech act routines in English. The instructional materials focused on ten speech acts, five speech acts for one set of classes and five for the other. The *Oral*

English course covered *introductions, greetings, compliments, invitations* and *leave-takings*. The *Foreign Language Communication* course received instruction on *offers, requests, suggestions, apologies* and *gift-giving*.

As the basis of language input for each of the 10 lessons within the semester, an assortment of edited video clips (averaging 12 seconds in length and focusing only on the production of a single speech act) were shown repeatedly to learners as they completed a series of questions (see below) on an in-class *guided discovery* worksheet that implicitly had learners concentrating on both the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic elements of each speech act. The learning outcome of guided discovery is that by using their problem-solving skills learners can become more adept analysts of conversational components such as speech acts – what these are on the linguistic level (pragmalinguistic) and how they relate or evince social relations (sociopragmatic).

Guided Discovery Questions

- What is the relationship between the man and woman?
- Is it close or distant?
- Where do you think they are?
- How does the man introduce himself? What does he say?
- How does the woman introduce herself? What does she say?

As an educational method used in applying scientific concepts and principles to everyday life situations through practical exploration and, more recently, in computer mediated learning centered on the individualistic nature of learning via computer, guided discovery is a teaching technique in which learners work with general concepts to arrive at specific results. More often than not, group-work is at the core of lessons. Though group members are not expected to arrive simultaneously at identical conclusions, the very nature of performing assigned activities within groups aids in assuring that few individuals will leave a lesson without having “learned” something of the day’s topic. Instructors’ roles within such a methodology are twofold: 1) to present compelling subject matter from real life that promotes learner motivation, and 2) to monitor learner progress on activities so as to assure that learning goals are being addressed.

Assessment

The video-based courses were assessed using two different tests, one designed to measure student learning gains (pre-/post test) and the other to determine the students’ comprehension of the instructional materials (course exam). Students participating in the three courses were given a pre- and post-test composed of a multiple-choice video element and a written discourse completion task (DCT) – once on the first day of class and once on the second to last day. To limit test-effect, the DCT was administered first, with the students answering one question per speech act. In part two of the exam, students were tested on their ability to recognize individual speech acts via video. Offered in a

multiple-choice format, the test gave students three viewings for each of the 20 clips (two clips for each speech act) and four options from which to choose. On average, the test took 40 minutes to administer. It was believed that over the course of 12 weeks any particulars of the exam would be forgotten, and therefore only a single test was used.

Students were also given a course exam on the final day of class. This tested the student’s understanding of the 66 odd clips and transcripts covered throughout the term of the course. All questions on the test stemmed directly from the clips and conversations. The test format resembled that of the pre-/post test in that there was a DCT and a multiple-choice video section. In addition to this was a series of multiple-choice questions where testees were given a transcript of a conversation along with a brief contextual description and were asked to choose from four options. Both sections of multiple-choice were designed merely to elicit student meta-awareness of particular speech acts—nothing more than judging whether a particular video clip or transcript was, for example, a *suggestion*, an *offer*, an *apology*, or a *request*. The DCT, on the other hand was designed to have students use their meta-pragmatic knowledge to produce specific speech acts within various contexts.

Discussion and Conclusion

Preliminary data reveal some promise to the effect of the video-based treatment, all of which follow what one would hope to expect from research of this nature: pre-/post-test results show gains over each semester (though it has yet to be analyzed as to the long-term effects of the delayed post-test treatments for students attending the course over a full year);

data from course exams (composed of questions taken directly from the course materials) show greater results than that of the post-tests (which tested student knowledge of materials not used within the course materials); and, as one would imagine, learners showed differing levels of comprehension and use depending on the speech act—data which lead to the - possibly obvious - view that certain speech acts could be considered easier to recognize and produce than others (e.g., recognizing and learning formulaic *greetings* would be simpler than applying the formulaic elements of a *suggestion* along with the logic and open-ended description of advice). Of course, further examination of the data is necessary before any conclusions can be drawn.

Though gains have been found using this instructional methodology, it is the opinion of the researcher that the very nature of the courses – how they are structured and offered within the university system itself - provides the greatest obstacle to student learning. Over the course of each semester, learners have access to a very limited amount and variety of input and instruction. In total, a student signed up for a single semester’s course would receive no more than ten classes (minus classes used for research and testing purposes) of instruction over the course of 13 weeks. At 90 minutes per class, that amounts to fifteen hours. Based on this calculation, any average ESL student enrolled in a run of the mill language school in the U.S. would get more hours of English instruction in a single week. This means that after two weeks of taking classes in an ESL program in the States, a student would end up with potentially more in-class contact hours than a student enrolled in a year’s worth of a single class under this present system.

Aside from the obvious comment that SLA requires ample amounts of comprehensible input for extended periods of time (with both Kasper and Schmidt, 1996, arguing for explicit instruction of both the pragmlinguistic forms and sociopragmatic routines), there is also the educational issue of many Japanese universities—such as the one where the present study was conducted—modeling foreign language courses based on the standard lecture-style/size of more traditional courses such as History and English Literature, where class size does not seem to impede students from learning the subject matter. Educational conditions conducive to SL learning require that students have opportunities to take the metalinguistic knowledge taught in their language courses and practice producing it within activities such as role-plays so as to, in the words of Kasper & Rose (in press), “gain control over [an] effective allocation of attentional resources”.

One potentially effective way of working around this problem of time constraint inherent with many institutional settings would be to provide SL learners with an on-line video data-base of speech act examples via something such as a streaming video server. Accompanying such a library of clips extracted from larger conversations could be a variety of interactive question/response tasks aimed at helping improve learner awareness of the sociopragmatic and pragmlinguistic elements in the conversations found within video. By providing such a resource, both language learners and instructors would have unlimited access to resources developed specifically for the study of pragmatics.

PowerPoint presentation ([click to view](#))

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