The First-Year Speaking Class: Developing Pragmatic Fluency for Globally-Minded Learners

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Students often arrive at university producing stilted and passive conversations based on patterns learned from junior high school onwards. While grammatically correct, these patterns are often completely divorced from the reality of serious communication. Speaking classes for first-year students therefore present a golden opportunity for students to start asking themselves critically, "Does it make sense for me to say this?" Functioning with a degree of pragmatic competence is an essential step for learners in becoming skilled English users, equally comfortable communicating overseas or with non-Japanese at home. This article proposes (a) a conversation model as a safety net for novice speakers, (b) conversation strategies to correct five common pragmatic errors such as introducing topics at the wrong time, failure to announce topic change, ineffective listening leading to inappropriate questions, the policeman interview, the spotlight performance, and failure to end conversations appropriately, and (c) functions of conversation that generate student content and stay away from junior high school level topics. We also provide examples of real exchanges that took place in the classroom to show how pragmatic competence develops.

大学生は、中学校以来学習してきたパターンに基づいた堅苦しく、受動的な会話をすることが多い。それは文法的には正しいが、自然な会話とは言い難い。1年生のスピーキングのクラスは、学生が自分の発話に対して「これで意味が通っているのか?」と考えながら話し始める絶好の機会である。一定の語用論的能力を身につけることは学習者にとって、英語を習得するため、つまり海外で不自由なく英語を話し、また自国で日本人以外の人と意思疎通ができるようになるために必要不可欠な過程である。本論では、次の3点を提案する。(1) 初心者のための模範的会話、(2) よく見られる5つの語用論間違い、例えばトピックを導入するタイミングが不適切であったり、トピックを変えることに失敗したり、聞き取りミスから不適切な質問をしたり、警察官的な質問をしたり、会話を一方的に取ったり、また会話の終わり方が適切でなかったりというようなエラーをしないための会話のストラテジー、(3) 中学校レベルの話題から脱却し、大学生らしい内容のある、目的に応じた会話。また、教室内での実際のやり取りの例を使って、語用論的能力がどのように伸びていくかを例証したい。

For students in their first year of university, compulsory speaking classes represent an excellent opportunity to improve proficiency, but only by avoiding some common pitfalls. The most serious of these may arise when teachers do not fully consider the real-world demands that speaking tasks should simulate and let students revert to interactional patterns learned at junior high school. Our experience with teaching first-years has shown us that when this happens, there is a critical failure to apply pragmatic awareness, resulting in the following unfortunate but real interaction that is still accepted by some tertiary level teachers:

A. I have a dog and hamster, guinea pig, bird.
B. I like guinea pig.
A. Very cute.
B. What name those animals?
A. Dog is Cherry, guinea pig is Choco, hamster is Coco, bird is Bun.
B. It's name nice name.
A. Speaking of foods, what foods do you like?
B. I like baked cheesecake. How about you?

In our view, this kind of exchange is not just pragmatically incorrect—it would not function outside the L2 classroom. It falls short of our university's competency standards by some distance (Matsumoto, 2013), particularly in relation to being "able to think logically with good judgement" and "communicate with people of different backgrounds and cultures." It is difficult to imagine this exchange being taken seriously by other non-native speakers, by us, and by the students themselves.

When EFL teachers do not set forth pragmatic behaviour routines to compensate for the learners' lack of automatic processing and output, their learners are left feeling cheated and unmotivated. First-year university students form the impression that, again, they are asked to interact like junior high school students playing a game or performing a comedy. However, it is vital that students develop pragmatic competence to be able to function properly in varied environments. We interpret their usual comment "I can't speak English" as a cry for more pragmatic fluency in L2 to feel secure in communi-

cation by acquiring "safety islands" (House, 1996) of routines. Students are keen to learn acceptable L2 language behaviour.

In this article, we discuss the specific kinds of pragmatic errors committed by first-year students at our university. We look at how to avoid such mistakes using a conversation model and explicit instruction of speaking strategies as stepping stones to help students to reach their conversation goals. We then detail how focusing on the functions of conversations, as well as using students' own input, helps to improve pragmatic awareness.

To assess students' improvement, we used the concept of pragmatic fluency, which "combines both pragmatic appropriateness of utterances and smooth continuity in ongoing talk" (House, 1996, p. 228). In each section we provide transcripts of our students' conversations side-by-side to show examples of pragmatic errors and the evidence of improvement, according to this definition of pragmatic fluency.

A Conversation Model

Figure 1. The conversation model given to students.

Our first step in correcting pragmatic mistakes was to give students a conversation model to follow (see Figure 1). We expected them to cover each stage as they practised speaking with classmates. If students missed a stage, their partners pointed it out, reinforcing the model. The model serves as a safety net for students lacking in confidence, as well as those whose interactions break down and need to get back on track.

Conversation Strategies to Correct Six Common Pragmatic Errors

♣ SMALL TALK ♣
Write about your recent life, news and weather. 1-5 keywords

Happy OR sad thing - 1-5 keywords
I got a new game,

Interesting OR exciting thing - 1-5 keywords
How to cook dessert

News story - 1-5 keywords
Report of Mako's marriage

Weather - 1-5 keywords
It's cloudy

Figure 2. A small talk homework task assignment.

Common Pragmatic Error 1: Introducing Topics at the Wrong Time

Solution: Small Talk and Big Talk

The first serious pragmatic error we found was the abrupt and jarring switch to topic questions (e.g., "Where did you go on your school trip?"; "What's

Table 1. *Conversations With and Without Small Talk*

Conversation 1: Small Talk Not Learned	Conversation 2: Small Talk Learned
A. Hello B. Hello. A. What's your hobby? B. My hobby is reading books. A. Me too. B. That's great. A. What kind of books do you like? B. I like historical books. A. For example? B. *Eien no zero* or *Kiyosukaigi*. A. *Kiyosukaigi*? B. *Kiyosukaigi* is written by Koki Mitani. Do you know? A. I heard. B. What is your hobby? A. My hobby is listening to music. B. Who is your favourite singer?	A: Hi B: Hello. A: How are you? B: Ah, I'm sleepy. A: Sleepy? B: And you? A: Ah, me too me too. Very sleepy. It's very hot today. I don't like summer. How about you? B: Ah, um. If it is very hot, I don't like summer. If it's warm, I'm glad. A: Oh I see I see. B: So anyway, hmmm, ah! Hey! I finished, finally, I finished Schoology. A: When? B: I finished Schoology just in time, last Wednesday. A: When when when? B: Last Wednesday. May 54th. A: May 54th? 24th? B: No no no no. I'm just kidding. It was May 24th. A: How's your score? Good or bad? B: I think it was good because I'll get average score is 85%. A: Oh, wonderful. But, I'm score is 90%. B: Oh, I think it's good. Ok ok, so anyway, let me ask you something. What's the best age to get married?

the best thing about your hometown?") directly after salutations, without any small talk:

A. How are you?

B. I'm fine, and you?

A. I'm sleepy. What animal do you like?

To correct this, we introduced the concept of *small talk* and *big talk*. *Big talk* denoted the stage in conversation for more serious discussion, such as "What's the best age to get married?" (see Conversation 2 in Table 1). We supplied suitable low-risk, accessible topics such as visiting a new cafe or watching a film, as well as news stories or the weather. We provided a framework for generating appropriate ideas and micro topics (see Figure 2) and asked students to prepare them as homework before every class. Table 1 shows conversations where students had not yet learned this skill and where students had practised the conversation extensively.

Common Pragmatic Error 2: Failure to Announce Topic Changes

Compensatory Strategy: Discourse Markers

When students have many things to discuss we found that they cannot introduce their ideas properly in conversations. The result is that they change topics without warning, as can be seen in Conversation 2 in Table 1. This error is particularly serious if topics are unrelated, as the interlocutor might think that the conversation was without purpose. Although the course textbook at our university introduces basic conversation strategies, including beginning and ending conversations, using rejoinders, and turn-taking, introducing topics is not covered. Here, teaching specific discourse markers is an ideal remedy because this helps create "EFL listeners who are more selective, active, and effective" (Tai, 2016). This means that students who know a variety of discourse markers are better equipped to navigate not just the changes between related topics, but also to signal what type of change is being made, such as prefacing a request for advice or a question.

Table 2. *Examples of Discourse Markers Taught*

Small Talk	hey, so
Changing Topic	so anyway, well, let me ask you something
Summarising	so the bottom line is, so it sounds like

Therefore, we explicitly taught *usage-based forms*, which are discourse markers targeting three key junctures: announcing small talk, signalling the transition to *big talk,* and announcing a summary (see Table 2) The conversations in Table 3 below demonstrate the difference when discourse markers had been taught.

Table 3. *Conversations With and Without Discourse Markers*

Conversation 3: Discourse Markers Not Taught	Conversation 4: Discourse Markers Taught
B. Where are you from? A. I'm from Shimane. And you? B. I'm from Ehime. A. What's your favourite hobby? B. I like playing basketball. I join the basketball club. Do you join any circle? A. I join soccer circle. B. Will you watch World Cup? A. Ah yes. B. I like Nagatomo. A. Nagatomo. Gold. B. What kind of food do you like?	B. **Hey**, last Sunday I went to Ozu for circle's picnic. A. Oh, that's great! B. Sky and river was very sky blue and beautiful. A. Oh, I want to go there. B. It was happy. A. Okay. **So anyway**, I want to lose my weight, but I can't stop eating. What should I do? B. Ah, I think you should exercise. A. No, I don't like exercise. B. Hmm, it's difficult problem. You should eat low-calorie food. It is goopita. goopita is ??? and satisfy, you should eat goopita. A. That's a good point.

The following three common pragmatic errors—inappropriate questions caused by ineffective listening, the spotlight performance, and the policeman interview—all help to create stilted, passive conversations. We will look at these errors in turn, before dealing with the solution, which also solves a further problem: failing to end conversations properly.

Common Pragmatic Error 3: Inappropriate Questions Caused by Ineffective Listening

We found that first-year students were often poor at asking pragmatically appropriate questions because of poor listening skills. This lead to questions being asked when the answer had already been supplied. Of course, some of these errors can arise because information has been missed or not clarified. However, many awkward situations occur because students do not pay attention to answers that they have heard:

A. What is a famous thing in Toyama?

B. My favourite thing is crab, for example *timaki* and *hotaruika*. How about you?

A. I want to go to Maizuru. That is port town. I want to see Togoheihatirou's house. What food is famous in Toyama?

B. I think crab. It's so big.

Common Pragmatic Error 4: The Policeman Interview

Another kind of problematic conversation is what we term the policeman interview, where one student questions and the other answers. Unless they plan to join the police, we like to suggest that practising interrogation skills is probably best done outside the English classroom. If answers are short and lacking in detail, then it is incumbent on the interlocutor to find a better topic, or better still, to allow their partner to change it:

A. Do you have free time in the day?

B. Yes.

A. How long do you do club?

B. Half a day.

A. Half a day!? Very very long. What part do you play?

B. I play the tuba.

A. Did you play it in the high school?

B. Yes.

Common Pragmatic Error 5: The Spotlight Performance

What we call the spotlight performance is the most egregious error we have come across because it is entirely inappropriate in any conversation. Students might be used to this style, having given prepared speeches at school and listened to others without interrupting. However, these speeches are completely one-sided, so listeners do not use rejoinders and follow-up questions:

A. Where did you travel in high school?

B. I went to Aomori and Hokkaido. I stayed at farmer's house and I harvested apple and peach. How about you?

A. I went to Hokkaido four days. I skiing in Furano all days. That's fun. Next day I went to Otaru. I ate many kinds of sweets and foods. It's very good.

When students give spotlight performances, they are only minimally invested in their interactions, becoming "disengaged achievers" (Price, 2014). They are completely unfocused on the pragmatic needs of interaction, which includes leaving space for a partner to ask questions. Non-Japanese might well cut off pre-prepared speeches like this with questions of their own, perhaps beginning with, "Are you a robot?"

Common Pragmatic Error 6: Failing to end Conversations Appropriately

Almost without exception, we found that students did not know how to signal that they wanted to finish the conversation nor how to end it appropriately. Students would pretend they had another activity to go to in the middle of a class (e.g., "Sorry, I have to go swimming now."; "Sorry, I have to go home."), or they would suggest they go somewhere together even though they hardly knew each other (e.g., "Let's go to a vegetable restaurant together."; "Let's go to a soccer view this time together!"). Unfortunately, while these excuses might be acceptable in a role play, we were not teaching a drama course.

Solution: Summarising as a Conversation Strategy

We found that teaching summarising is a very efficient way of solving the pragmatic infelicities of inappropriate questions, passive interactions, and ending conversations with unrealistic clichés. Giving a good summary of a conversation demands that students pay close attention to the details they hear, which eliminates questions where the answer has already been supplied. Gathering sufficient information for a summary encourages students to clarify details and ask for further information. The onus is on the listener to disrupt pragmatically inappropriate patterns like the spotlight performance or the policeman interview so that they are no longer viable. Additionally, students are motivated to give an accurate summary because their interlocutor will give them instant feedback regarding whether they are correct or are required to provide more clarification.

Summaries are also an excellent antidote to the unrealistic excuses students provided to end conversations. Especially, when used with expressions such as *the bottom line is* or *in a nutshell*, summaries signal to interlocutors that it is time to end the conversation. For us, summarising is the most important additional communication strategy we teach because it helps students to improve in multiple areas and increase their confidence, as well as promote conversation management and resolve interactional impasses (Huddlestone & Fairhurst, 2013; Kehe & Kehe, 1994). To illustrate the improvement that is possible, in Conversation 5 in Table 4 ends abruptly, but Conversation 6 includes a summary:

Table 4. *Conversations With and Without Summaries*

Conversation 5	**Conversation 6**
A. Where did you travel? B. In high school, I went to Tokyo and Kanagawa. I went to Tokyo Disneyland, Thukagai and so on. I ate little green men *manju*. It was very delicious. I have to go. See you. B. OK! See you.	B: So, so, in other words, we should do exercise. OK? A: Mmm B: OK. I think the… the important point is, refresh. So, seeing very beautiful sight is very important point. A: I think not moving is the most bad things. Nice talking with you. B: Me too. Thank you. A: Bye.

Content that Contributes to Pragmatically Unsound Conversations

Junior High School Topics as Problematic Content

Whether chosen by teacher or student, using the same topics in first-year university speaking classes as those from junior high school (e.g., hometown, high school trips, family) was problematic because it encouraged spotlight performances. Unfortunately, using junior high school topics at university simply produces more junior high school English.

Lack of Depth in Topics

Another problem was low detail answers. This meant that speakers in conversations kept changing topics. Low detail answers are understandable when students' lexicons are narrow, but are also caused

when a partner has little or no interest in the topic. This can then lead to a policeman interview with students unwittingly and impolitely shutting down discussions:

A: I watched *Doraemon* many times.

B: Do you like *Doraemon*?

A: I like *Doraemon*.

Solution 1: Focusing on Conversation Functions

As we see it, one of the key drivers behind pragmatic errors is that students fail to engage in true communication. For content, they select topics haphazardly, without paying attention to the interests of their interlocutor. When students treat conversations in this way, they commit a grave error. That is why we shape our instructional approach around the functions of conversations so students think about why they are talking to their partner beyond merely practising for a speaking test.

To deal with problematic content, we retired topics commonly used at junior high schools. Instead, we used the following functions so that students build a new conversation schema based on appropriate and relevant exchanges of information:

- Asking for recommendations and giving them.
- Asking for opinions and sharing them.
- Asking for advice and sharing it.

Conversations based on these functions are less prone to becoming policeman interviews or spotlight performances because answers need to be justified. In a nutshell, function-centred activities promote the exchange and negotiation of meaningful messages (Meddings & Thornbury, 2015), as in the conversation below:

A: So anyway, I'm planning the trip plan during the summer vacation. I want to go to Tokyo.

B: Tokyo.

A: So what is the best way to go to Tokyo?

B: Ah... ok. I think you should use airplane.

A: Oh... airplane.

B: Airplane.

A: Airplane. It is because the airport is near.

B: Yeah yeah.

A: And it don't take so long time to go to Tokyo.

B: Ah, but isn't it so expensive?

A: No no no!

B: No?

A: If you use cheap plan...

B: Cheaper plan?

A: You can go to Tokyo three, four thousand yen.

B: Oh, excellent!

Solution 2: Foregrounding Student-Generated Content

We believe that for learners, "communication should, first and foremost, be 'about themselves'" (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009, p. 10). Therefore, to make our function-based conversations more compelling to students than junior high school topics, we gave them the responsibility of completing task handouts by selecting content based on the details of their lives. For example, in an asking-for-advice task, students added issues such as "how to eat healthily at university," "how to use time effectively," or "how to deal with noisy neighbours."

When students determine learning content, it ensures individual relevance. When the content has to be used in the context of a conversation function, students also have to ensure peer relevance. Therefore, students who select content themselves are motivated to add sufficient detail and are less likely to choose inappropriate content because function-based conversations make students accountable to their partners. In this respect, it would be illogical to ignore learners who are "in a unique position to look for relevant resource materials [and] know what their own needs and interests are" (Hall, 2001). We recognise that relying on student-generated content might make some instructors uncomfortable. However, when teachers give clear guidelines, transferring responsibility for content conveys further benefits, like increased confidence and autonomy (Brown, Iyobe, & Riley, 2013).

Conclusion

If university students are to interact appropriately in English, no matter what the location, it is essential that they develop fuller pragmatic competency. In this article we have argued that common pragmatic errors made by first-year students can be easily corrected. Teachers can offer students a conversation model, then introduce using discourse markers and summarising as conversation strategies. Errors can also be reduced by focusing on functions of conversations and giving students responsibility for topics.

In developing global communication skills, we encourage teachers to reflect on their students' conversations and assess if these are pragmatically sound. It is often the case that students themselves are aware of the inappropriateness of the things

that they say. We suggest, therefore, that adopting the strategies outlined here might be more welcome than teachers might imagine.

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[JALT PRAXIS] TLT INTERVIEWS

Torrin Shimono & James Nobis

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An Interview with Fiona Creaser

Welcome to our final interview for 2018! Our featured discussion is with Fiona Creaser, an Associate Professor at the University of Kitakyushu. She received her doctorate in East Asian Studies from the University of Durham, which investigated the problem of sexual harassment in Japan. She has published on various forms of harassment, including workplace bullying and mobbing. She teaches gender studies, and her research interests include sexual harassment, workplace bullying, and women´s self-development and empowerment programmes. Ms. Creaser was interviewed by Robert O'Mochain, an Associate Professor in the College of International Relations at Ritsumeikan University. He received his doctoral degree from Temple University