

Pragmatic Competence Through Discourse Analysis

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This exploratory study evaluated the effectiveness of an experimental course designed to train EFL students from Japanese universities in specially adapted discourse analysis techniques. Questionnaires and individual interviews were used to investigate the extent to which the course would influence the participants' ability to appreciate pragmatic meaning in authentic communication and motivation to use authentic materials to learn English. It was found that the course deepened the participants' appreciation of pragmatic influences on authentic communication as well as appreciably increasing their motivation to use authentic materials to learn English. These findings have several implications for the future of pragmatic language teaching.

この研究は、日本のEFL大学生を対象にディスコース・アナリシスの様々なテクニックを訓練する実験的な講座の有効性を調査したものである。この講座には2つの目的があり、1つ目は、オーセンティックな英語のコミュニケーションの語用論的能力を向上させること、また2つ目は、英語の勉強にオーセンティックな資料を活用するモチベーションを高めることであった。これらの目的を調査するため、アンケートと個別のインタビューを行った。調査の結果は、参加した生徒のオーセンティックな英語のコミュニケーションの語用法に対する理解を深め、オーセンティックな資料を使うモチベーションを高めたことを顕した。この結果は、これからの語用論的能力の教育にいろいろな影響をもつであろう。

WITH ENGLISH increasingly being used internationally as a *lingua franca*, there is an ever-growing demand for people who can use English to communicate effectively in real-life situations. However, it has been observed that even advanced language learners often have problems dealing with pragmatic meaning in naturalistic language (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). These problems are often attributed to the fact that learners commonly develop linguistic competence in the absence of pragmatic competence, particularly in spoken communication (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990; Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998). In this exploratory study, I attempt to address this issue by investigating the effectiveness of an experimental discourse analysis course on 11 EFL students from Japanese universities. This course was designed to improve the participants' ability to appreciate and deal with pragmatic influences on authentic spoken communication by training them in a range of discourse analysis techniques.



A Rationale for Training Language Learners in Discourse Analysis

The use of discourse analysis methodology in ELT is still in its relative infancy but some notable work has been done into the use of discourse analysis to develop pragmatic competence in language learners. Two notable examples of books focusing on the applications of discourse analysis in ELT are *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers* (McCarthy, 1991) and *Pragmatics: Teaching Speech Acts* (Tatsuki & Houck, 2010). These texts provide a useful resource for creating more pragmatically appropriate materials and interesting activities to develop pragmatic competence in language learners. However, several problems are apparent in current approaches.

Firstly, a bottom-up approach tends to be taken by focusing on individual speech acts and providing examples of how they are performed. However, it has been noted that speech acts are rarely performed individually, but occur in conjunction with other speech acts as part of more complex interactions (Murray, 2009). Consequently, by focusing on individual speech acts, we risk giving students a narrow view of the communicative process (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1991; Murray, 2009). Secondly, these approaches can be susceptible to being influenced by teacher intuitions, as they rely on the teacher to select language which reflects their idea of appropriate models of speech (Crystal & Davy, 1975; Gilmore, 2007; McCarthy, 1991). Finally, even though current pragmatic materials focus on having students consider contextual influences on speech, the lack of emphasis on sociocultural influences on communication has been noted (Gilmore, 2007). This may be due to the fear that the use of unfamiliar, culturally-laden language in authentic materials may result in culture shock that might negatively affect the learning process (Alptekin, 1993; Martinez, 2002; Prodromou, 1988). Although explicit awareness-raising activities can play an extremely useful role in the development of pragmatic compe-

tence, bottom-up approaches alone seem insufficient for developing a strong pragmatic competence in language learners.

Aims and Research Question

Taking these issues into consideration, the primary aim of this experimental course was to gradually introduce the participants to adapted discourse analysis techniques so that they might be able to use them with authentic materials to develop their awareness of the importance of pragmatic influences on communication and their ability to deal with pragmatic meaning in authentic language. The second aim was to increase the participants' motivation to use authentic materials by providing them with a pragmatic "tool kit" which they could apply to any authentic materials they may use in the future (Murray, 2009).

Considering these aims, the following research question guided this study:

To what extent was the course successful in achieving the two pedagogic goals of:

- a) increasing the participants' appreciation of pragmatic influences on authentic language, and
- b) increasing the participants' motivation to use authentic materials to learn English?

Participants

Due to practical constraints, recruiting participants for the study was problematic. Five universities were approached in Sapporo, Hokkaido, from which 11 learners were willing to give up 5 weeks of their free time to participate in the study. Linguistic ability levels varied greatly throughout the group.

Although this sample was far from ideal, the diverse nature of the participants meant that it was possible to collect rich and varied qualitative data from a number of different perspectives.

Therefore, for the requirements of an initial exploratory study, this sample was deemed satisfactory.

Course Design

A task-based language teaching (TBLT) methodology was used for the design of the course. TBLT was chosen for its compatibility with research findings on language learning that suggest that tasks encourage the cognitive processes and operations necessary for the effective acquisition of new skills, as well as the development of intrinsic motivation within the learner (Ellis, 2003; Long & Crookes, 1992). In addition, TBLT's learner-centred approach allows content to be organised by the needs of the learners as individuals in the learning situation (Brindley, 1989). Table 1 summarises how this approach was employed.

The course consisted of four sessions held over 4 weeks: an opening 90-minute orientation session to introduce the course and three 120-minute core units. Unit 1 was designed to introduce Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory and Grice's (1975) work on the Cooperative Principle and Conversational Maxims. The main aim of the unit was to raise the participants' awareness of the various ways that a speech act can be performed in different contexts. Particular emphasis was made on indirectness in speech acts as it has been suggested that language learners have particular difficulty with deciphering illocutionary meaning in authentic communication (Tatsuki & Houck, 2010). In addition, Grice's Conversational Maxims of Relevance, Quality, Quantity, and Manners (Grice, 1975) were introduced to highlight the importance of cooperation in communication and how communication can break down if these maxims are not adhered to.

Units 2 and 3 introduced adapted elements of Gee's (2011) Language in Use model of discourse analysis. Unit 2 was designed to focus on three of Gee's seven internal influences on communication: Significance, Identities, and Relationships (Gee,

2011). The aim of this unit was to build upon the skills introduced in the first unit and also to encourage a deeper appreciation of how contextual factors can influence the way speech acts are performed. Examples covered included how people can use language in different ways to construct their own identities and how people use language in different ways depending on their relationship with their interlocutor.

Table 1. Structure of Course Units

Stage	Description
Pretask	Participants are introduced to the new discourse analysis elements through a series of audio and visual examples with mini-tasks designed to raise awareness of how those elements can be used to access pragmatic meaning in communication.
Task	Based on pretask input, participants work in pairs to analyse the task clips and answer questions about pragmatic content, such as identifying speech acts within the materials, considering the illocutionary meaning of a specifically highlighted sentence, and using the elements of discourse analysis introduced in that particular unit. Instructor monitors the groups, providing guidance where necessary.
Posttask	Pairs merge into groups of four to compare their findings and present their results. Instructor gives feedback and may present other points of pragmatic interest.

The final unit of the course introduced three of Gee's four external influences on communication: Social Languages, Discourses (renamed here as Non-Linguistic Communication [NLC]), and Intertextuality (Gee, 2011). In order to attempt to address the thorny issue of culturally laden language in authen-

tic materials, examples were examined of how people often use language connected to a social group to construct their identities; how cultural representations connected to one's external appearance and behaviour, such as clothing or gestures, may influence communication; and how background knowledge from a separate source can sometimes be necessary to understand authentic interaction.

Course Materials

Materials for this course consisted of course booklets specifically designed by the author of this study, and audio-visual materials with script booklets that were taken from the American TV situation comedy series *Friends*. Some Japanese language materials were also used in the pretask phase of unit 3 to enable better appreciation of sociocultural influences on communication.

Script booklets were distributed along with the DVDs of the audio-visual clips a week before each unit so that the participants could familiarise themselves with the materials. The course booklets introduced the new elements of discourse analysis for that unit and the main task activities, which used these elements practically to analyse the authentic materials through answering the task questions. An example of these booklets with annotations can be found in the appendices.

As this course took a top-down view of speech acts, it was preferable that the audio-visual clips had a variety of speech acts to make more interesting and challenging analysis tasks. Criteria for the selection of clips included: (a) the capacity to be understood as a lone interaction, (b) the capacity to clearly exemplify the discourse analysis element being focused on, (c) the lack of overtly obscure language which could render the clip impenetrable, and (d) overall entertainment value.

Research Methodology

As this was an exploratory study, I decided that it would be best to take a mixed-methods approach with a strong-qualitative, weak-quantitative focus so I could respond in a flexible way to new details or openings that may emerge during the process of investigation (Dörnyei, 2007).

Data for this study were collected via two data collection instruments. Questionnaires collected quantitative data using 5-point Likert-scale questions and qualitative data via open-ended questions. The participants were encouraged to give detailed answers about their perceptions of the course; therefore, they could answer these questions in English or Japanese. In the final session of the course, a 15-minute interview was also conducted with each participant to obtain additional qualitative data and probe areas of interest identified in questionnaire responses.

Qualitative data were first transcribed and translated, then analysed via a 3-stage iterative process (Dörnyei, 2007). Using the quantitative data as a guide, the qualitative data were first broken into chunks and put into abstract categories. These were then analysed again to identify any interrelationships between categories. Finally, core categories were selected from the analysis to create an overall picture of the effectiveness of the course.

Results and Discussion

The quantitative results of Questions 3 and 4 (see Table 2) of the postcourse questionnaire clearly indicated that the participants perceived that the course had been beneficial to their language learning development:

Table 2. Likert-Scale Results of Questions 3 and 4, N = 11

Question	Scale rating				
	1	2	3	4	5
4. By taking this course, do you feel that you understand more about what is important for effective communication?	0	0	0	5	6
3 By taking this course, do you feel that you want to use authentic materials more to study English in the future?	0	0	0	5	6

Note. 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree

We can see that all the participants perceived that their ability to appreciate and deal with pragmatic meaning in authentic language, as well as their motivation to use authentic materials, had increased after completing the course. Furthermore, responses from the translated qualitative data provide evidence of the development of pragmatic awareness and motivation to use authentic materials among the participants.

Results from the precourse orientation questionnaire suggested that the participants had given little consideration to the importance of pragmatics in effective communication. This lack of awareness was reflected in the postcourse questionnaires and is illustrated by the comments:

- I had never thought of the feelings or situations of the main characters so it was an interesting experience.
- The most important thing was that I had never thought about the meaning hidden in the words until now.
- Even though I understand grammar I have never spoken English while feeling the indirect meaning (I had never tried or even been aware of it).
- I never thought about indirect meaning before, you see. I

only studied the textbook so I only thought of the surface meaning. I didn't think about the indirect meaning. In the textbook there isn't a lot of that kind of thing, is there. There is absolutely no feeling of being angry or sad. It was a new experience.

By the comments we can see that many of the participants had rarely, if ever, considered illocutionary meaning, cultural influences, or the pragmatic context when studying English. Some also noticed that the language used in their textbooks was pragmatically impoverished and indicated that they would gloss over pragmatic difficulties when using authentic materials.

However, the participants generally felt that their ability to appreciate pragmatic influences had improved after completing the course. Analysis of the qualitative results revealed three interesting effects. Firstly, there was a range of comments throughout the course that indicated that the participants' ability to appreciate illocutionary meaning in authentic communication had improved:

- I tried to catch all the points of the tasks and understand what the people want to express as well as the surface meaning of the words.
- There were parts that I didn't understand just by watching them at home. I thought that I had to soften (make more flexible) my thinking.
- Until now, I watched dramas and I just watched over parts I didn't understand without caring. Now, I could understand these parts by the things that I studied in this course so when I watch dramas from now on, I feel that I will be able to understand them more deeply.
- I was always catching what [the characters in *Friends*] said so I don't try to understand what they actually want to say so . . . I think now I try to understand what they want to say.

These comments indicate that through using discourse analysis, the participants generally came to appreciate that the language used in authentic spoken communication often cannot be comprehended from a direct, linguistic translation of the text. Consequently, many realized that in order to understand authentic communication it is important to consider the intentions of the speakers and the illocutionary meaning behind their words.

Secondly, there was much evidence indicating the development of the participants' appreciation of sociocultural and contextual influences on communication.

- Understanding the speaker's relationship with their listener and the identity they are trying to portray was very useful for understanding the indirect meaning of both of their conversations.
- After studying and watching the movie in the pretasks, when I watched it again, I realised the NLC and Intertextuality and was surprised by how different it was to watch.
- I thought culture is really deep, you know. If you don't know that then you can't understand it at all. I could understand the meaning of the words but I couldn't understand what they were saying at all. When a funny joke came up, I couldn't understand it at all.
- I didn't know the concept of intertextuality before so now, when I watch movies or some TV drama and of course when I talk with some friends or someone, I sometimes notice it.

This aspect of the course seemed to be the most interesting for the participants. Many reported feeling surprised or even shocked once they started to understand the extent of sociocultural and contextual influences on authentic communication. As a result, many came to realise that much of the language they could not understand and had glossed over in their previous use of authentic materials could be due to these factors.

Unlike illocutionary meaning, it was interesting to observe that the meaning of culturally laden language in the materials was obscure for many of the participants, even with a lot of assistance from the instructor. However, whilst the meaning remained obscure, the participants were able to effectively identify occurrences of intertextuality and social languages by using the discourse analysis elements introduced in unit 3 of the course. This suggests that if learners are able to use discourse analysis in class to identify sociocultural influences on authentic communication, it may also be helpful to prepare them for dealing with problems they may encounter with culturally laden language when communicating in real-life situations.

An unexpected effect of the course was that many of the participants reported noticing similarities between L1 pragmatic considerations employed in their daily lives and those they used when using discourse analysis to attempt the tasks in English.

- It was my first time to watch a DVD while thinking about "Speech Acts" so it was easier to understand the story. This is something I do naturally when I am watching Japanese movies and in my everyday life, so I want to study Discourse Analysis more.
- [I understood] the way of talking to superiors even when there are no honorific forms in English. Metaphorical expressions like Intertextuality are also often used in Japanese so I felt that it holds a very important position in conversation.
- Even though I'm Japanese, I have many things [regarding intertextuality] I can't understand when I watch TV.
- I felt gesture is different from country to country but, after studying discourse analysis, I felt that gesture was social to social, not between the nations. It is young to old and the relationships. Some gestures really look like Japanese ones.

These comments reflect that the participants noticed several pragmatic similarities between their L1 and L2, including the

use of honorific and polite forms, the use of metaphor, and the use of gestures. This indicates that as the participants' appreciation of pragmatic influences on communication developed, similarities between the modes of communication of the participants' L1 and L2 seem to become more apparent. Consequently, some reported that they could begin to connect what they had learnt to real-life situations and that the cultural gulf between communicating in their L1 and L2 was not as large as they might have thought. This is an area that would be interesting to investigate further in future studies.

Finally, there was much evidence provided by the participants to indicate that the course was also largely successful in achieving its second goal of increasing the participants' motivation to use authentic materials to learn English.

- I learnt that I could effectively study, even alone, if I use authentic materials.
- The English in textbooks is for Japanese people, it is made easier to understand, but authentic materials are made for native speakers to enjoy so they are very difficult but, if I use them more, I think I can really improve.
- When I watch movies, sometimes I just focus on a particular dialogue scene but I didn't check some speech acts or what this person is trying to say, the background meaning or something. But now I can use the speech acts.
- I thought . . . If I want to skill up my conversation I have to live in another country but I thought that I can study in Japan [with discourse analysis].

Here we can see that after completing the course, the participants felt that they could use the discourse analysis tools they had learnt to appreciate meaning that they might have just glossed over in the past and access pragmatic meaning in naturalistic language. It also seemed to give them a sense that they could use discourse analysis with authentic materials in the

future to improve their communicative ability. As a result, many reported that this course had not only had a positive influence on their ability to use authentic materials to learn English but also to enjoy using them in general.

Implications for Pragmatic Language Teaching

The results of this study raise some important implications for the role of discourse analysis in pragmatic language teaching and the way that authentic materials can be used in ELT for improving pragmatic competence.

It was clearly indicated that training learners in discourse analysis techniques can be an effective way to help them develop their pragmatic awareness. The results of this study suggest that by using discourse analysis, learners can gain a deeper, top-down appreciation of the broad, pragmatic influences on authentic communication. Learners can also acquire a set of tools that they can use to access pragmatic meaning in any naturalistic language they might encounter. Consequently, learners can use discourse analysis techniques with authentic materials to help improve their pragmatic competence. At this point, it must be strongly emphasised that this study is not attempting to negate the importance of focused, bottom-up pragmatic teaching approaches. Rather, it suggests that by providing learners with a grounding in discourse analysis techniques, these skills could be used to increase the effectiveness of more focused pragmatic activities. In this way, a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches to pragmatic language teaching could have great benefits for the development of pragmatic competence in language learners.

This study was largely successful in achieving the goals set out for it. However, if the experimental course used here were to be repeated, there are some improvements that could be suggested. First and foremost, an appropriate amount of time needs

to be allocated for any future courses as, after 4 weeks, the course ended just as the participants were starting to get used to identifying speech acts and considering pragmatic meaning. If this study were repeated, it would be preferable for each discourse analysis element to be focused on separately and to have at least two sessions for each element: an analysis session focusing on developing the learners' discourse analysis skills by analysing authentic language, and a practical session where the learners can apply what they have learnt through practical speaking tasks, such as role-plays.

Secondly, during the study, some of the participants mentioned that they would have liked to analyse materials from a variety of different sources. They also found the Japanese language examples used in the pretask stage of unit 3 to be very useful for understanding more difficult sociocultural elements of discourse analysis, such as Social Languages and Intertextuality. A longer time frame for the course would allow for flexibility to use a wider variety of materials from both the learners' L1 and L2, and hence would provide a richer learning experience for the participants.

Conclusion

The development of pragmatic competence in language learners is one of the major issues in ELT today, as it has been suggested that even advanced language learners can experience difficulties when dealing with pragmatic meaning when communicating in real-life situations (Blum-Kulka et al, 1989). The experimental course used in this study attempted to address this issue by training a group of university EFL students to use a range of discourse analysis techniques. The findings indicated that through using these elements in a learner-centred environment, the participants were able to acquire a set of tools that they could employ to access pragmatic meaning in authentic materials from a top-down perspective. As a result, the participants

felt they were able to gain a deeper appreciation of pragmatic influences on authentic language as well as a higher level of motivation to use authentic materials to learn English.

Bio Data

For the last 5 years, Ian has been head teacher of a private language school in Sapporo, Hokkaido. In April 2013, he became an instructor in the English Discussion Center at Rikkyo University, Tokyo. In 2012, he graduated with distinction with an MA in TEFL / TESL from the University of Birmingham where his main research interests lie in the fields of learner development and pragmatics.

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Appendix A

Example of Mini-Task to Introduce the Concept of Speech Acts

What are speech acts?

This is how we DO things with language, for example, greeting or requesting.

Activity

How many speech acts can you think of?

Apologizing	Explaining
Complaining	Parting
Inviting	Thanking

We can do speech acts in many ways. We can be:

Polite or rude Short or long Direct or indirect

Activity

How many ways can you ask for a pen in Japanese?

Could I borrow a pen?	Pen, Please.
Would you at all mind lending me a pen for a little while?	
I can't find my pen!	Give me a pen now!

Appendix B

Tasks

Example of a script to be used with the main task. Main speech acts are highlighted and identified in parentheses.

Unit 1 – Group 1 – Task 1

[Situation: Ross wants to dress like Santa for his son Ben on Christmas. He goes to the costume rental shop and speaks with the salesman but there are no Santa costumes left.]

Ross: Hey!

Salesman: Hello, sir. You're here to return those pants?

Ross: No, these are my pants.

Salesman: Oh. Okay! How can I help you?

Ross: Well, uh, do you have a Santa-outfit left? (Requesting)

Salesman: Two days before Christmas? Sorry, man. (Refusing)
Did you try Costume City?

Ross: Yeah, Yeah. I've tried everywhere. Please, please. I mean, I'll pay extra. (Requesting/pleading)

Salesman: Sorry. But! I do have 74 of them coming back on the 26th. (Refusing)

Ross: Okay look, do-do, you have anything Christmassy? I promised my son, and I really don't want to disappoint him, um, come on, I . . . uh, you gotta have something. (Requesting/pleading)

[Scene: Monica, Chandler, and Phoebe. Monica has just opened the door for Ross who is costumed as an Armadillo. Ben is standing next to her.]

Ross: I'm the holiday armadillo! I'm a friend of Santa's and he sent me here to wish you (points to Ben) a Merry Christmas!

Appendix C

Example of a Task Sheet

Group 1 - Task 1

1. What do you think are the two main speech acts in this clip?
Requesting / pleading and refusing.
2. What language do they use to perform these speech acts?
See script in Appendix B.
3. What does the salesman mean when he says "Oh. Okay!"
He is saying that his pants look strange (like fancy dress costume pants).
4. Were any of the cooperative principles broken?
There don't seem to be any big problems but the salesman saying "You're here to return those pants" may break the principal of Relevance and definitely causes an awkward situation.
5. Can you find any other speech acts and interesting phrases?
Christmassy is an interesting word. It is interesting how you can change a noun into an adjective by adding a *y*.