Teaching pragmatics for test preparation

Jill Murray
Macquarie University

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This paper explores how the study of pragmatics can be integrated into the design of test preparation courses. It reports on a case of explicit teaching of pragmatics to one group of advanced language users: overseas trained teachers in Australia, who were preparing for a professional entry test in English communication. By taking an ethnographic and reflective stance regarding language choices and examining their own identity as language users, the candidates were not only able to prepare for success in the test but also to increase their confidence in dealing more effectively with subtle aspects of workplace communication.

本稿は試験準備コースをデザインする上で語用論の研究をどう取り入れることができるかを考察したものである。オーストラリア在住の海外で訓練を受けた教師たちを対象とした英語試験の準備コースで、上級レベルのグループに語用論を明示的に指導したケーススタディについて報告する。受講者たちは、エスノグラフィックかつ内省的な立場で言語を選択し、言語使用者としての自らのアイデンティティを考察することによって、試験に向けての準備ができただけでなく、職場でのコミュニケーションの微妙な側面にもより効果的に対処できるという自信を増すことができた。

Pragmatic competence is an aspect of communicative competence that involves being able to use language in context, and consists of linguistic, sociolinguistic, textual and cultural knowledge and skill. As Cohen and Ishihara (2005) note: “Learners of a language can have all of the grammatical forms and lexical items and still fail completely at conveying their message because they lack necessary pragmatic or functional information to communicate their intent” (p. 3).

Different language tests operationalise, measure and emphasise the importance of pragmatic competence in different ways and to different degrees, in line with the assessment purpose. This article looks specifically at one example of a high stakes language test, but it is argued that the conclusions drawn and the practices advocated can be applied in the design of test preparation courses across a wide range of instructional contexts.

Pragmatic competence and language tests

Construct validity in test design is achieved by the selection of language skills and language elements for assessment, (Alderson, Clapham, & Wall 1995, p. 13), which is made based on theories of language and language competence. Influential theories include those of Canale and Swain (1980), Canale (1983) and Bachman and Palmer (1996). Pragmatics does not fit neatly into any of these.

Canale's 1980 tripartite framework consisted of *grammatical, sociolinguistic* and *strategic* competence, with pragmatics situated in the second of these categories. In a later version (Canale, 1983) the addition of the category of *discourse* led to pragmatic competence being distributed between the two elements. Speech act theory tended to be situated in sociolinguistic competence, but other aspects of pragmatics, such as the use of mitigation strategies in writing and the understanding of implicature, could be more logically categorised as a part of discourse competence. Bachmann's influential model (1990) divided language competence into *organisational* and *pragmatic*, with the latter concerned with the relationship between language users and the context, and subdivided into *illocutionary* and *sociolinguistic* competence. In contrast to Canale's framework, the two are separated, with the former focussing on speech acts and the latter on sensitivity to register and dialectal variation. Again, discourse aspects fall outside the scope of Bachmann's definition of pragmatic competence. The category of *textual* competence, a component of organisational competence, contains elements which fall into the domain of pragmatics, areas such as use of discourse markers, indexicality, presupposition and entailment. Politeness theory for example, would span both categories of illocutionary and sociolinguistic.

As Green (2006) observed, "it is not linguistic forms which carry pragmatic information, but the fact of their utterance" (p. 407). Pragmatic competence cannot be exercised without the knowledge of the effect of the utterance (or non-utterance) of certain forms within a cultural context. As such, pragmatic competence overlaps intercultural competence, and teaching involving a focus on linguistic pragmatics needs to be continually referring back to knowledge of the different parameters of culture and the impact they can have on pragmatic transfer.

The key words in describing intercultural competence seem to be *effective* and *appropriate*:

> Intercultural competence is a complex set of abilities needed to effectively and appropriately interact with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself. **(**Fantini, 2008, p. 21)

However, as Fantini goes on to point out, *effective* refers to a view of one's own performance while *appropriate* refers to "how natives perceive" it. Indeed, there is no gold standard for what constitutes appropriateness except that which is judged to be unlikely to cause misunderstanding or offence. In tests when learners are assessed by native speakers, it is the NS view of appropriate that can determine success or failure. In the real world contexts in which test-takers find themselves afterwards, a broader, more culturally pluralistic meaning may operate.

Pragmatic competence is a requirement for success in many high stakes tests, even if not stated explicitly. Some pragmatic knowledge is always assumed, even if the test presents a limited range of contexts in which to be appropriate and limited information about how it is operationalised.

In IELTS, for example, it is evident from the band descriptors, reproduced below:

> BAND 9 **Expert User**: Has fully operational command of the language: *appropriate*, accurate and fluent with *complete understanding*.
>
> BAND 8 **Very Good User**: Has fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and *inappropriacies*. *Misunderstandings may occur in unfamiliar situations*. Handles detailed argumentation well. (IELTS, 2008, emphasis mine)

TOEIC band descriptors also refer to appropriate discourse:

> TOEIC Level 8 Scale:
>
> Typically, test takers at Level 8 can create connected, sustained discourse *appropriate* to the typical workplace. (ETS Canada, n.d.)

The web description of the new TOEIC states explicitly:

> ... tasks give test-takers the opportunity to respond *with language that is appropriate to the situation;* in other words, how would someone at work respond in this particular situation? (ETS, 2009)

For the test preparation teacher, the pragmatic/cultural elements are closer to the surface and more readily discernible in direct tests. The higher the level of real life authenticity in the test tasks, the more the pragmatic aspects of communicative competence become evident, and the more readily teachers can address them. However, it must be remembered that all tests that assess communicative competence with any degree of validity, are also to some extent assessing pragmatic competence. Teachers and course developers attempting to prepare test candidates need to be familiar with the underlying theory of language and the emphasis given to possible aspects of pragmatic competence in the corresponding tests. To some extent test writers' assumptions can be retrieved from an analysis of the tasks and criteria, but greater transparency and access would be of great value.

Teaching pragmatic competence

Since the early 1990s there has been a considerable amount of research in the teaching and assessment of various aspects of pragmatic competence. A growing body of evidence suggests that although some aspects of pragmatic competence are probably transferable from L1 and do not need to be taught (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Rose, 2005), in other areas both the implicit and explicit teaching of pragmatics can lead to learning. (Bouton, 1994; Dufon, 2004; Dufon & Churchill, 2006).

Studies of the teaching of pragmatics have been conducted in varying contexts and at varying proficiency levels. Takahashi and Beebe (1987) and Matsumura (2003) reported that high levels of grammatical competence did not necessarily correlate with high levels of pragmatic competence, although the nature of pragmatic infelicities varied according to the language resources that the second language users had at their disposal. Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998) examined how ESL and EFL learners were able to recognize grammatical and pragmatic infelicities, and how serious they considered them to be. This study was restricted to a small range of speech acts, but was successful in demonstrating that factors other than proficiency level were influential on the learners' awareness. These included the learning environment and the availability of L2 input.

There also exists a growing literature evaluating the effectiveness of attempts to teach a range of aspects of pragmatics. Both Kasper and Rose (2002) and Rose (2005) have produced detailed evaluative reviews of the teaching of speech acts, implicature, pragmatic routines and strategies, discourse markers and fluency. The variations amongst these studies in terms of the nature and proficiency of target groups, teaching time, implicitness/explicitness of teaching and assessment procedures make it challenging to compare them, but in general the conclusions regarding the value of teaching are positive. Almost all the documented cases, however, seem to focus on single aspects of pragmatic competence, with a strong emphasis on speech acts. Teachers in professional entry test preparation contexts need to take a broader, more inclusive approach, based on the way pragmatic competence is operationalised in the tests for which their students wish to prepare, as well as the contexts in which candidates may later find themselves needing to communicate effectively and appropriately.

The Professional English Assessment for Teachers: An Australian case study

Australia accepts around 120,000 migrants annually, the majority of whom are in the visa category of skilled independent. These include highly qualified and experienced education and health professionals. Before being permitted to re-enter their profession, many migrants must pass a specifically designed high level language test.

Examples of these are the Occupational English Test for Health Professionals, (OET), and the Professional English Assessment for Teachers (PEAT). The latter was commissioned by the NSW Department of Education and Training for administration to primary and secondary teachers, with a pass grade designed to correspond to a level of spoken and written communicative competence which would permit candidates to satisfactorily carry out the duties of a teacher. While a health professional is required to have the language proficiency to meet all communicative requirements of the workplace, the responsibility of teacher extends further—to the role of language model and guide. For this reason candidates must demonstrate high levels of proficiency in all skills and across all language domains relevant to the professional workplace. Full details of the test and exemplar materials can be downloaded from the test provider website (UNSWIL, 2007). This is a test of advanced level proficiency, in which pragmatic competence plays a significant role.

In this paper the PEAT speaking assessment will be discussed. In the current form of the assessment there is one assessor/interlocutor who conducts the entire procedure, with all tests recorded for moderation by senior assessors.

The tasks in the speaking component of the PEAT are as follows:

1[a]. An interview, in which the candidate has the opportunity to outline and comment on various aspects of his or her educational background and teaching experience. In this section candidates are asked three published questions, but also have to respond to unpredictable follow up questions.

1[b]. A discussion on an education-related topic of contemporary relevance. A list of typical topics is published, but the topic need not be taken from the list. Candidates are not evaluated on their actual knowledge of the topic: if it is outside their direct area of experience they can be speculative in their responses and still receive a high mark.

2. A simulated interaction with a parent, colleague or student, usually centered around some issue that needs to be resolved.

3. A subject-specific presentation to an imaginary class including reading aloud, asking questions and other aspects of the language of classroom management.

Published assessment criteria are:

- Overall communicative competence/effect on interlocutor (including fluency)
- Comprehensibility (focus on phonology)
- Comprehension (including underlying meanings)
- Discourse strategies (appropriate to the audience and to the task)
- Lexico-grammar (accuracy and appropriacy). (UNSWIL, 2007)

These criteria are made available to the candidates, but not their relative weighting. While it is possible to apply for a detailed report giving a breakdown of unsuccessful candidates' individual strengths and weaknesses, this is limited to information about what actually happened in one specific test. Few test-takers are in a position to obtain explicit input or feedback on their pragmatic competence as part of their day-to-day lives, and yet their failure to demonstrate it stands as an obstacle to resuming their professional roles.

Course design approach

The remainder of this article will discuss aspects of a pilot project in which a program was designed to explicitly teach pragmatics to advanced learners preparing for the PEAT. This includes a sample extract from the content analysis grid, which matches concepts from pragmatic and/or intercultural theory with specific communication knowledge and skills. Tasks which require these skills are listed separately, first for the test and then for real life workplace contexts.

The teaching described in this paper was carried out with one group of test candidates attending an 18 week fulltime course at a college of technical and further education (TAFE) in 2008. The design and teaching of the pragmatics component was undertaken by the author, with linkages to other aspects of the program made by Dr Judie Cross, main teacher and co-ordinator of the course.

The pressures put on the TESOL profession by the test taker as a "customer who must be satisfied" have led many test preparation teachers to develop a focus on test-taking strategies over actual language proficiency. However, it must be remembered that the ethical responsibility of a test preparation teacher is not only to maximise the probability of learners achieving test success but to achieve this by equipping them with the knowledge and skills that the test is designed to assess. A well designed test will foster this positive washback, and to a large extent the PEAT does do this, but the nature of the testing process itself means that it is not possible to duplicate all the demands of a complex workplace. For example, a lot of the difficult interactions that teachers have in the workplace will be with children, but because taking the role of a child would place excessive demands on the acting skills of the interlocutor/assessor the simulation usually involves an adult colleague or parent. As such, the syllabus content for this course was derived from an analysis of the tasks involved in the test, but also from the real world tasks they were designed to sample and assess. This was done by producing a grid relating each major area of pragmatic theory to the test and real world tasks.

A sample of the analysis is given below. The theoretical material in the first section deals with cultural concerns, and provides the beginnings of a metalanguage through which pragmatic transfer can be discussed and analysed. The second area reproduced in full refers to a more specific aspect of pragmatics: Grice's co-operative theory and the conversational maxims of quality quantity relation and manner. Other areas that were considered include: speech act theory, politeness theory, speech events and activity types, conversational analysis, indexicality, metaphor and figurative language, prosody, pragmatic transfer and its role in pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure.

The value of these particular aspects of pragmatics in other test preparation course design would be likely to vary according to the features of the test under consideration, and the degree to which they could be discussed in English would depend on the maturity and the proficiency level of the students. However the format and categories given in the sample below could have widespread application.

Table 1 shows how choices of teaching activities for the course had their origins in pragmatic and intercultural theory. Knowledge and skills are derived from the theory, and areas in which they are deployed are listed in the third and fourth columns of the table, first for the test and then for real life workplace contexts.

The teaching cycle

Teaching involved both theoretical and practical input, and thus the starting point for any new aspect of pragmatics could either be the theory or the whole texts in which it was manifest. In the case where the theory was introduced first, it was done in a way that maximised its value in reading, listening or speaking skills enhancement. As the participants' knowledge of pragmatics built up over time, it was possible to take a more holistic, text-based approach to teaching, and to recycle concepts through their manifestations in successful and less successful versions of recorded texts.

The basic teaching cycle that was followed is shown in Figure 1 below.

Table 1. Sample syllabus design grid

Theory	Pragmatic or cultural knowledge/skill	Relevance to test	Relevance to real life post-test success	Teaching activities
Cultures in contact	High and low context cultures	Amount of detail in information provided in Q1a and 3 Assumed knowledge	Insight into the behaviour of colleagues, parents and students from different cultural backgrounds	*Background readings (Hall, 1976, 1990; Hofstede, 1980)* *Cross cultural classroom discussion activities* *Out of class reflection tasks, reported in written form in a learning journal, and discussed in follow up class sessions*
Cultural tendencies and preferences Intercultural competence	Individualism vs. collectivism	Attitudes to authority Degree of individual initiative shown in problem solving in Q2	More successful negotiation in situations of potential conflict	
	Negative and positive politeness based cultures; deference/solidarity	Choice of politeness strategies; degree of deference shown in simulations Q2	Improved facility in understanding the cultural origins of misunderstandings Enhanced ability to engage in discussions with students regarding cultural issues, and to mediate in student cross cultural communication	
	High and low power distance	Degree of tentativeness shown in expression of opinions Q1b Expectations of learner deference, and choices of classroom management strategies and language Q3		

Theory	Pragmatic or cultural knowledge/skill	Relevance to test	Relevance to real life post-test success	Teaching activities
Co-operative Principle and Gricean maxims	Examine cultural attitudes to the maxim of quantity and relate to high and low context cultures	Q1a Provide suitable amounts of information in interview	Participate more successfully in a casual workplace conversation	*Introduction to theory* *Exercises identifying that a system of choices exists in deciding what, and how much information to convey* *Exploring implications of choices and how they alter meaning* *Identifying types of implicature* *Discussing cultural assumptions underlying mis-interpretations* *Exploring cultural origins of attitudes to the use of irony*
	Make considered decisions about amount of information required in a context	Q2 Understand speaker intent and react appropriately to flouting and violation of maxims in roleplay	Understand colleagues' expectations of frankness and reticence	
	Examine cultural attitudes to the maxim of quality (and the relationship of this to direct/indirectness)	Q3 Avoid inappropriate use of irony	Understand the cultural basis of flouting of the maxim of quality and its role in indirectness	
	Understand implicatures, involving flouting of maxims		Identify and correctly interpret understated criticism	
	Recognise the role of flouting the maxim of quality in irony, hyperbole, and other rhetorical devices Recognise the role of flouting the maxim of quantity in indirectness, understated criticism		Recognise and react appropriately to irony and sarcasm (colleagues and students) Use irony?	

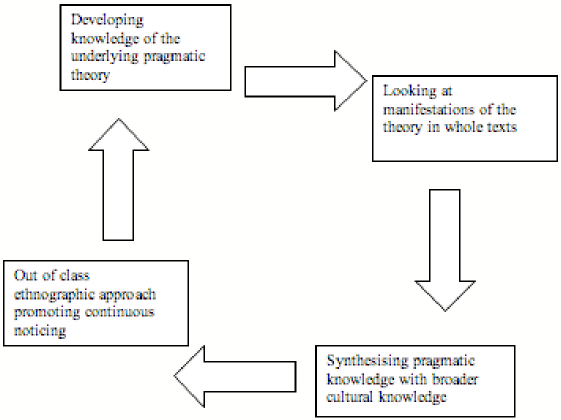
Developing knowledge of the underlying pragmatic theory
Looking at manifestations of the theory in whole texts
Synthesising pragmatic knowledge with broader cultural knowledge
Out of class ethnographic approach promoting continuous noticing

Figure 1. Teaching cycle

Many of the participants had been residents of Australia and users of English for a considerable time. Because of this they did not see themselves as language learners in a conventional sense and adapted readily to the role of researcher/ethnographer. One illustration of this in the cultural strand of the course involved readings and discussions on the forms of address used in different cultures, examination of some examples of inappropriate use due to pragmatic transfer, and a follow-up noticing task. In this task a grid was completed including all the forms of address they had heard or used, both in day-to-day life and the media, and in English and other languages. Noticing the gap (Schmidt, 1992) between their own language choices and those which they observed was crucial. Follow up discussions encouraged the development of insights into areas in which modifications could be made to each person's own repertoire and the range of its application.

Sample materials

Several examples of teaching materials are shown below.

1. Politeness theory: From scenarios to cross cultural analysis

In the teaching of the theory and application of politeness, firstly a number of scenarios were provided in which face-threatening acts might need to be performed.

These included:

1. Get some other staff members to stop talking in a professional development meeting because you can't hear the speaker.
2. Ask a colleague to move his car because you can't get yours out of the car park.
3. Warn a colleague not to take your whiteboard marker.
4. Refuse an invitation to go for a drink after work.

No additional information was given about context or roles. Participants worked alone and produced a response to 12 of these scenarios using what they considered to be an appropriate illocutionary act.

Then they listened to a lecture which introduced the theory and terminology of politeness theory, specifically covering the following areas:

Face-threatening acts (FTAs)—weightiness

Positive and negative face

Application of politeness in FTAs

- Bald on-record, direct, no politeness
- Negative politeness
- Positive politeness
- Indirect strategies

Politeness maxims /strategies

This provided them with metalanguage but also practice in note-taking and asking for clarification, both of which are useful for other aspects of the PEAT. A follow up discussion was held to ensure that a working knowledge of the concepts had been successfully achieved.

The next phase involved taking an analytical approach to their earlier responses to the scenarios. These were evaluated in terms of their appropriateness in the context which the participants had envisioned them taking place, and in terms of the newly acquired theoretical insights. A follow up group discussion/reflection posed the following questions:

- Which of the politeness maxims seem to be most important in your first culture?
- Go back to the last exercise and look at the answers again. What politeness strategies have been used?
- Translate your answers as literally as possible into your first language. Do they seem appropriate or not?
- What does this say about how politeness is achieved in the cultures represented in your group?

2. Assumed mutual knowledge: Critical evaluation of a recorded simulation

In the simulation candidates would often create a negative impression on the interlocutor/assessor by seeming to make inaccurate assumptions about the amount of information necessary for them to provide. In this activity, a practice dialogue was examined, in which the role of the parent was played by the author, a native speaker of English, and that of the teacher by a test candidate.

> **Parent**: Good afternoon, I'm Michael Thompson's mother...you wanted to see me...
>
> **Teacher**: I just wanted to see you, you know, I just wanted to um talk to you about...Michael Thompson's...I'm the teacher of him...and....I wish to talk to you on this regard that...he is not at present a good student. You know generally he is...er...he is always you know, late...in his class and...well submitting the class assignment... assessments....
>
> **Parent**: Uh huh..?
>
> **Teacher**: And you know I have already issued him with 2 N-notifications, you know...
>
> **Parent**: Oh dear!

Teacher: Yes, he is not...you know...to that level... and he should...(pause)...He has to do a lot more... in his subject...and I think so that he should go for arts rather than science...because science needs a lot of intensive studies....

(interview continues for 2 minutes.)

Candidates listened to the interview and were provided with a transcript, which they examined in terms of the knowledge each participant would expect the other one to possess:

What does the parent already know/believe?

What does the parent not already know/believe?

From the dialogue, what does the teacher *seem to...*

- believe the parent knows?
- believe the parent does not know?

Try to identify points in the interview where these difficulties are resolved.

Which ones are not resolved?

How do you know?

In the next phase, they were given the following information to prepare and attempt a role-play in which they had to break bad news to a parent they had not met before.

- His/her child is not performing well in your subject area.
- The parent may or may not already know there is a problem.
- The parent may or may not be receptive to the news you are going to give.

Strategies to draw out information about mutual knowledge were discussed and evaluated and the resulting transcripts were analysed, with the process repeated in an iterative cycle.

Evaluation of the course

After each pragmatics session the candidates were given anonymous evaluation forms in which they were invited to rate the class on a scale of 1-5 in terms of its usefulness, and to note what they had learnt. This served the dual function of providing feedback to the teacher and helping the students to reflect on their learning. Invariably, the usefulness was rated as 4 (high) or 5 (very high). However, the ongoing reported learning was not as informative as would have been ideal, with many of candidates relating their comments to a specific part of the test rather than the pragmatics they had studied. (e.g., *Today we learnt about the roleplay.*) While this is in line with their primary motivation in undertaking the course, a more structured evaluation/reflection form is planned for future courses. During ongoing teacher observation of class activities and discussions, an increased willingness to participate in recorded tasks was noted and an enhanced understanding of the reasons for some of their negative communication experiences appeared to contribute to greater confidence.

A summative evaluation was also conducted. Improvement in confidence and attitude are also reflected in the typical comments reproduced below.

> *During the preparation course this semester, I have realized that there were too many mistakes made by me. However, I have been making progress and feel more confidence now.*

> *Over this semester, I have learned more about the requirements of the PEAT.*

> *Before attending this course I was not aware about my shortcomings. This course helped me a lot to improve myself.*

Finally, perhaps the most gratifying comment of all:

> *I have passed the PEAT.*

Conclusion: Generalisability of this course design approach to other tests

The manner and extent to which this approach to course design can be applied to other tests depends on several factors. As discussed above, all tests that claim to assess communicative competence also measure pragmatic ability. The course designer needs to consider the theory of language underlying the test, and the extent to which pragmatics (implicitly or explicitly) form part of the test criteria. If test success provides entry to an academic or professional context, it is also vital to look beyond the test to how pragmatic competence relates to post-test real world concerns.

Practical questions also need to be addressed, for example: In the time available for teaching, how much classroom time can be devoted to pragmatics? If student proficiency in English is not advanced, can L1 be used for analytical and discussion tasks? If other skills areas constitute a more pressing need, then can input of pragmatic knowledge serve a dual purpose by being integrated into other skills areas—e.g., providing topics for reading and listening texts or speaking or writing activities?

In conclusion, it must be remembered that the status and relevance of "nativelike" pragmatic competence in language testing is not static, but changing with the rise and diversification of English as an international language. In the future the focus on pragmatics in both teaching and testing is likely to shift more towards the intercultural, where *effective* dominates *appropriate,* and "correct" application of pragmatic norms gives way to using language to realise and reflect higher levels of empathy and co-operation among language users. Course designers and test writers alike need to keep pace with this change.

Jill Murray is a lecturer in the Department of Linguistics at Macquarie University, where she completed her PhD in 2000. She teaches postgraduate courses in pragmatics, SLA, testing, and the social context of TESOL. Before coming to Macquarie, She worked for over 2 decades in EFL and ESL teaching, and English and LOTE teacher education. Her research interests include teacher development, teaching and applying pragmatics, and metaphor. <Jill.Murray@mq.edu.au>

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