Developing L2 Pragmatic Competence Through Project-Based Learning

Justin Charlebois

Critical to communicative success in this era of globalization are pragmatic awareness and competence. A promising instructional approach for attaining these traits is project-based learning (PBL), as it promotes the development of problem-solving skills as well as deeper engagement in course content. This paper describes how PBL was used in a university-level intercultural communication course to sensitize learners to the pragmatics of disagreement, mediate analysis of its expression in authentic discourse, and provide opportunities for authentic practice.

グローバル化時代においてコミュニケーションを成功させるためには、語用論的な認識と能力が重要である。これらの特性を獲得するための有望な教授的アプローチとして、課題解決型学習(PBL)がある。この学習法は、授業内容への関与をより深めるとともに、問題解決スキルの発達を促進するからである。本論では、大学の異文化コミュニケーション講座において、PBLの採用がどのように学習者を意見相違の語用に敏感にさせ、実際の議論でそれがいかに表現されているかについて分析する助けとなり、実践的学習の機会を提供したかについて報告する。

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In our increasingly interconnected and globalized world, interactions between individuals with different sociocultural backgrounds are now commonplace. However, misunderstandings can occur when interlocutors possess different norms for social interactions, such as how to appropriately accept a compliment or decline an invitation (e.g., Taguchi, 2015; Taguchi & Roever, 2017). Instruction can facilitate the development of learners' pragmatic competence (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig et al., 2015; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010), and project-based learning (PBL) is an instructional approach that can be used to engage learners in authentic experiential learning experiences. This article discusses the importance of understanding pragmatics for language education and how PBL can be utilized to facilitate pragmatic competence. It then describes a concrete example of how PBL can be used to immerse second language learners in experiences involving authentic discourse and, thus, foster the development of their pragmatic abilities.

The Importance of Pragmatics

Pragmatics, that is, the ability to use language appropriately in specific contexts (Taguchi, 2015; Taguchi & Ishihara, 2018), has been shown to play an instrumental role in achieving second language proficiency (Cohen, 2017; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). In fact, native English speakers in many Anglo-American contexts view pragmatic breaches more unfavorably than linguistic errors (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Takahashi & Beebe, 1987). To increase pragmatic competence, learners can benefit from both the implicit and explicit teaching of pragmatic routines (Cohen, 2017; Taguchi, 2015).

Pragmatic conventions vary due to factors such as geographic region, gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status and, thus, must be taught in reference to specific contexts. Additionally, they are fluid, multi-faceted, and situated in specific *communities of practice* (Wenger, 1998), in dynamic relation to which they must also be presented (Taguchi & Ishihara, 2018).

While researchers and practitioners alike have long devoted considerable attention to the teaching of speech acts (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Taguchi & Roever, 2017), we are now witnessing a paradigm shift where speech acts are not taught in isolation but as produced in discourse (Cohen, 2017, 2019). In short, learners benefit from noticing how speech acts are realized in certain situations and then practicing them in class, but instruction must extend beyond the level of speech acts as pragmatics also encompasses other areas, such as politeness, implicature, conversational management, and discourse markers (Cohen, 2017, 2019).

The Potential of Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning is an inquiry-based instructional approach that aims to teach scholastic subject matter through experiential learning. The aim is to teach nonlinguistic subject matter in the target language, and projects are a pathway to achieving that goal. PBL engages students in producing an authentic product, with the instructor acting as facilitator. Although the determination of

exactly what constitutes PBL varies within individual classroom contexts, Larmer and Mergendoller (2010) claim that "traditional" projects are primarily used as a mechanism to *assess mastery* of course content, whereas PBL projects serve as vehicles to *teach* that content.

PBL can be utilized to effectively teach pragmatics because it allows instructors to design their course so as to incorporate into their students' learning experiences the production of pragmatically appropriate discourse. Below is an illustration of this possibility in the form of an actual example.

A University-Based Example of Teaching Pragmatics Using PBL

I teach a multi-week PBL unit in an upper-division course on intercultural communication. As one of my course topics is disagreement strategies, my PBL unit focuses on disagreement. However, the principles of its design can be adapted to other academic subjects and contexts as well. The specifics of my particular PBL unit are discussed in detail below.

After the first two lessons, which are spent using the textbook, I introduce students to the project by showing them a clip from a U.S. news broadcast, in which several experts weigh in on a current issue and use disagreement strategies. In contrast to this format, Japanese news media typically feature an expert from a prestigious university or other institution giving an opinion or analysis of an issue and are typically less antagonistic in nature. Thus, I also show the students a clip from a Japanese news broadcast for the purpose of cultural comparison. I select these clips because they provide material for discussing media discourse in two different cultures. Before reshowing the clips, I ask the students to note what they notice about the news programs. In groups, the students are asked to discuss their observations about the programs and later share their views with the rest of the class. Since the purpose of this introductory activity is to spark the students' interest and introduce them to the topic of disagreement, at this time I do not explicitly teach them about the interactional norms of these broadcasts; however, we eventually tap into this rich source of pragmatic input to discover the pragmatics of disagreement.

Next, I introduce the central focus of the unit. The goal of the project is to teach students about the pragmatics of disagreement in conjunction with course content. As members of a team, students choose a course-related topic to research and an authentic discussion format (e.g., debate, newscast, podcast, interview, talk show), through which to eventually present their findings to the rest of the class. For example, a team could choose to conduct a panel discussion about the challenges that an individual from a high-context culture faces while residing in a low-context culture. In this way, students not only learn academic course content about cultural adaptation but also practice disagreement strategies when they deliver their presentations. Although the students are entirely free in their choices of topic and format, the project requires that all team members actively participate in the actual discussion.

I then provide the students with the necessary background information for researching how disagreement is expressed in their chosen format. Naturally, the way disagreement is expressed is contextually bound and exhibits variation (Maíz-Arévalo, 2014). For example, the social distance between interlocutors influences how they express disagreement. While mere acquaintances may need to preface disagreement with hedges, intimates can often explicitly disagree without harming their relationship. As students have not yet learned about the discursive features of disagreement, I provide some contextualized instruction about the pragmatics of disagreement.

Students most often choose discussion formats that involve mitigated, rather than strong, disagreement (e.g., podcasts versus political debates). As such, I start by teaching them the main strategies that pragmatically competent speakers employ to express mitigated disagreement, that is, indirect disagreement using linguistic expressions that soften the main speech act and thereby decrease the potential face threat (Maíz-Arévalo, 2014). To illustrate, I provide explicit instruction using contextualized examples of adjacency pairs that show how individuals use hedges ("I guess," "it seems"), downtowners ("maybe," "perhaps"), requests for clarification ("maybe I didn't understand"), and expressions of regret ("I'm sorry but I have a different opinion") to diplomatically express a contrasting view. As an application exercise, students are presented with authentic examples from podcasts and news broadcasts and asked to identify the relevant strategy and explain its discursive functions in the specific context.

However, because language learners benefit from gaining exposure to different forms of disagreement, I later also expose students to unmitigated, *strong* disagreement (e.g., "no way"). Specifically, I help students who select more combative discussion formats find research on unmitigated disagreement that supplements the basic strategies

taught in class. With this knowledge, students can more easily find authentic examples of unmitigated disagreement that they implement into their own discussions.

This focus on elucidating the nuances of disagreement strategies reinforces the point that disagreement is complex and often occurs over several turns and counters the stereotype that blunt disagreement is normative in English. Moreover, it also encourages students to analyze how disagreement emerges in authentic discourse and thus develop their ability to become linguistic ethnographers (Ishihara, 2016; Roberts et al., 2001).

The next phase of the project involves sustained inquiry, whereby the students work on the project with their teammates and receive instructor support both inside and outside of class. Students may modify their own research questions as they encounter new and relevant information from the class lessons and from individual student–teacher conferences. As the previous example of the challenges of living in a low-context, individualistic culture is too broad, the focus could be narrowed to the difficulties Japanese exchange students face when adapting to life on a U.S. college campus. After researching U.S. college life, team members would need to develop a final presentation where they could discuss the different cultural challenges Japanese students might face and enact a discussion in front of the class. For instance, they could choose to prepare a panel discussion where they perform the roles of Japanese students sharing their experiences in the U.S. As each individual would be expected to have different experiences of college life in the U.S., the panelists would naturally use disagreement strategies when sharing these experiences, for which they would also need to previously view authentic examples of panel discussions to learn how to express their views in this format.

As the inquiry stage is iterative and not static (Larmer et al., 2015), students may find they need to refine their own research questions, search for additional references, and conduct additional field research by viewing various media. For instance, they may need to use the internet to find interviews with students about campus life in the U.S. to increase their knowledge. In doing so, they can simultaneously tap into a rich source of authentic discourse and integrate that language into their discussion. While a fixed deadline must be set for the public presentation, this continual feedback encourages students to accept constructive criticism and strive to produce a superior final product.

The final phase of the project is the public presentation, which requires the students to enact their discussion in front of the class and field questions from the audience. Each student is also required to submit an independently written reflection paper about their learning experience, including the research and collaborative processes as well as the final product. Students reflect on the entire process to develop the ability to evaluate their own work and apply their learning to new situations.

Discussion

The language of disagreement is notoriously difficult for language learners to master. They tend to either avoid disagreement altogether or underuse the relevant language (Bardovi-Harlig & Salisbury, 2004). This tendency may stem from exposure to ELT materials that present decontextualized expressions of agreement and disagreement (Ishihara & Paller, 2016), leaving learners unfamiliar with the functioning of mitigation strategies in interactional contexts. As disagreement is a face-threatening speech act, learners may avoid it based on the pragmatic norms of their first language (Ishihara, 2018; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). However, learners need pragmatics-focused instruction to master mitigation as insufficient mitigation could result in communication breakdowns in high-stakes contexts and thus have detrimental consequences (Ishihara & Paller, 2016). In an attempt to increase learners' pragmatic awareness, I selected authentic discourse so students learn to notice how these speech acts are nuanced and how they develop over multiple conversational turns.

PBL is an instructional approach that can be used to foster the development of students' pragmatic competence and analytical skills. The internet provides access to authentic discourse educators can use to help students deepen their pragmatic awareness. In an effort to cultivate learner autonomy, my particular PBL unit engages students in the process of finding authentic discourse so they not only increase their pragmatic awareness but also improve their own pragmatic competence. The rationale behind involving students in identifying how disagreement manifests in social interaction is that this process encourages them to become ethnographers (Ishihara, 2016; Roberts et al., 2001). Ordinarily, linguistic ethnography would entail language learners traveling or residing abroad and observing how language is used in specific communities of practice. In the internet age, however, all language learners now have access to naturally occurring data that they can use to increase their pragmatic competence and further develop their linguistic repertoires. As this PBL unit involved analyzing discourse to identify the features of disagree-

ment, the learners can hopefully apply the same analytical process to other speech acts (e.g., giving and refusing compliments, accepting and declining invitations) and, thus, they become linguistic ethnographers who are adept at deciphering pragmatic strategies and increasing their own pragmatic competence.

This project could be extended by teaching students the pragmatics of disagreement in other contexts or other manifestations of oppositional talk. I highlight oppositional discourse because it is often face-threatening and can result in pragmatic failure. Clearly, news media, television programs, and film provide accessible sources of input. Learners who will spend a portion of their professional or academic lives in multilingual environments would benefit from exposure to pragmatic norms of other varieties of English. The normalization of computer-mediated meetings and conferences also necessitates more exposure to other varieties of English. Language teachers can expose learners to other varieties of English to promote greater tolerance of linguistic pluralism and prepare them to communicate in a world where English is a global medium of communication (Taguchi & Ishihara, 2018).

Conclusion

One goal of language teaching is to foster learners' ability to navigate the complex communicative terrain of an increasingly global world. A means of achieving it is to implement authentic learning tasks that reflect actual communicative contexts. The long history of pragmatics instruction and recent shift toward creating more authentic ELT materials further advances the goal of supporting the development of learners' pragmatic competence. As such, language teachers must provide students with examples of authentic and diverse discourse. The integration of pragmatics instruction into a PBL course is yet another way we can further support the development of communicative competence. PBL engages students in a collaborative process that can equip them with the critical thinking, pragmatic competence, and global awareness that will help ensure their success in a world that is increasingly complex and no longer defined by national boundaries.

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[JALT PRAXIS] TLT INTERVIEWS

Torrin Shimono & James Nobis

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Welcome colleagues, and a happy New Year to you all! We are thrilled to bring you two fantastic interviews to kick off 2023. The first interview is with Yuko Goto Butler, a Professor of Educational Linguistics in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. She is also the Director of the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) Program there, and was a plenary speaker at the JALT2021 international conference. Her research primarily focuses on the improvement of second/foreign language education among young learners in the U.S. and Asia in response to the diverse needs of increasing globalization. Her recent edited books with colleagues include Research Methods for Understanding Child Second Language Development *(Butler & Huang, 2022) and* English for Young Learners in Asia: Challenges and Directions for Teacher Education *(Zein & Butler, 2022). After her plenary talk at JALT2021, she was interviewed by Jeremy White, an Associate Professor in the College of Information Science and Engineering at Ritsumeikan University. His research is focused on computer assisted language learning (CALL) and game-based learning with a focus on low-level Japanese learners of English. He is also a PhD candidate at Kyoto University. So, without further ado, to our first interview!*

An Interview with Professor Yuko Butler

Jeremy White

Ritsumeikan University

Jeremy White*: Thank you for your time today. Language systems of young learners seem like a challenging area for you to have focused your research on. How did you get there?*

Yuko Butler: I got interested in assessment through my initial interest in language teaching and language policies. Assessment should be closely tied with teaching and learning, but they are often discussed separately, and I always think that this is very unfortunate. I have been very interested in language policies as well, and of course, assessment and policies are quite connected. When I started my graduate program in California, I was very interested in language policies around English-learning im-