

Expositions

Criticality and Creativity in L2 Pragmatics: Supporting Linguistic Justice Through Pragmatics Instruction

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Opening with a description of what the teaching of *linguistic (im)politeness* or *pragmatic competence* in an additional language entails, this *Expositions* argues that pragmatics can, and should, be incorporated explicitly into everyday teaching from the first day of instruction for all learners as it is a key component of effective intercultural communication. Through a learners-as-ethnographers approach, students can raise their (meta)pragmatic awareness and practice pragmatic language use effectively in the classroom. As with the multilingual turn in the wider field of applied linguistics, I argue that the native-speaker model may not be desirable, relevant, or achievable in pragmatics-focused instruction and that creativity and criticality often drawn upon in translanguaging interactions constitute a key feature of multilingual pragmatics. However, it should be noted that translingual practice can also be a source of linguistic racism and is sometimes romanticized to the point where it ceases to reflect the reality of multilinguals, who become targets of linguistic injustices and discrimination. Given that translanguaging is no panacea in all social or educational settings, I discuss the importance of sociopragmatic understanding of the current global climate as well as metapragmatic awareness of multilingual agency and linguistic (in)justice.

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本稿では、第二言語の(イン)ポライトネス、つまり語用論的能力の指導の概略を導入とし、語用論は効果的な異文化間コミュニケーションの重要な要素であるため、あらゆる学習者に対して指導の初日から明示的に組み込むべきであると指摘する。学習者をエスノグラフィーの研究者に例える手法を主眼とした教室での指導により、学習者は(メタ)語用論的意識を高め、語用論的な言語の使い方を効果的に練習することができる。ただ注意が必要なのは、より広い応用言語学の分野における多言語主義への転換において展開した議論と同様に、語用論のことばの使い方に焦点を当てた指導においても、母語話者のモデルが常に望ましく現実的で到達可能な目標というわけではない可能性である。むしろ、トランズランゲージングを登用したやり取りにおいて頻繁に活用される創造性と批判性こそが、多言語語用論の重要な特徴なのではないだろうか。ただし、トランズランゲージングなどの多言語使用は言語的差別の一因となる可能性があり、時には美化され過ぎて多言語話者が言語的不正義や差別の対象となり得る現実を反映しなくなる危険性にも着目すべきである。トランズランゲージングを含む多言語使用がすべての社会的または教育的状況において万能薬ではないことを踏まえ、現在のグローバルな状況に関する社会言語学的理解の重要性、および多言語話者の主体性と言語的(不)正義に関するメタ語用論的意識の重要性について論ずる。

Keywords: creativity; criticality; linguistic (in)justice; metapragmatic awareness; translanguaging; translanguing practice

In effective communication, we make linguistic choices that meet the affordances and constraints of the sociocultural context. We typically know how to greet our friends in a friendly manner and how to respectfully address our supervisors in a way preferred in the community. Pragmatic competence comprises our ability to jointly construct our meaning with our interactants both verbally and non-verbally within the given sociocultural context (LoCastro, 2003). For example, in order to “do things with words” (Austin, 1962), we often use language indirectly to convey meaning in a less imposing manner. To build or boost rapport, we often interact playfully or even sarcastically with listeners we think will appreciate such rhetoric.

Using and interpreting indirectness, implicatures (i.e., implied meaning), or irony can be a challenge for language learners as it requires reading cues, such as phonological tone, body language, technological conditions, and the social context, which interact with the implicit message behind literal meaning. Addressing someone in a socially preferred manner requires cultural or institutional knowledge; calling a lawyer *sensei* in the office, the emperor *heika* even in relatively informal occasions, or identifying oneself with a funny nickname in a university seminar, presuppose socialization into each local institutional setting. To respond to a friend’s invitation to dinner without hurting anyone’s feelings or appearing socially inept, we need to know how acceptance and refusal are typically made in the language we use in the community and negotiate our meaning jointly with

our interactional partners given their backgrounds and personalities. In other words, we are constantly building human relationships through the words we use and the demeanor we employ within sociocultural contexts.

Although an increasing number of pedagogical materials have been published to teach L2 pragmatics in the classroom, die-hard myths still prevail around pragmatics-focused instruction today. Some believe that pragmatics is a domain specifically reserved for advanced learners or cognitively developed adults and that pragmatic instruction can only fine-tune the skills language learners have already mastered (i.e., *the icing on the gingerbread*, Thomas, 1983, p.109). Others believe that pragmatic competence can be developed only by interacting with native speakers of the language. Related to these misconceptions is the belief that pragmatics should be learned in a natural setting as it cannot be effectively taught in the classroom.

Despite such myths, this *Expositions* argues that pragmatics can, and should, be incorporated into everyday teaching from the first day of instruction for all learners because it is a key component of effective intercultural communication. Explicit instruction in pragmatics in formal classroom settings has been found to effectively accelerate adults' learning even in a foreign-language context, where the target language is not typically spoken outside the classroom (Polensky & Zhuang, 2019). Pragmatic instruction has also been implemented for children and learners with disabilities or disorders, who sometimes have difficulty identifying meaning conveyed indirectly (e.g., Ingersoll, 2010; Janzen et al., 2022; Savić et al., 2025).

The reality is that learners can raise their (meta)pragmatic awareness and practice pragmatic language use effectively with their peer learners (van Compernelle, 2015) and through scaffolding provided by both "native-" and "nonnative-" speaking teachers (Cohen, 2018). Transcending this problematic dichotomy, *multilingual* speakers' and writers' metapragmatic awareness can be developed through a learners-as-ethnographers approach with critical analysis of issues related to identity and culture (for details and examples, see Ishihara, 2022).

Moreover, it has been argued that in pragmatics-focused instruction, the native-speaker model may not be desirable, relevant, or achievable (Ishihara, 2019a, 2019b, 2024; Taguchi & Caprario, 2023; Taguchi & Ishihara, 2018; Walkinshaw, 2022), as widely argued in relation to language education or language ideologies in general (e.g., Bouchard, 2022; Hiratsuka, 2024; Levis, 2024; Takeuchi, 2023b). In a recent *Expositions*, Levis (2024)

argued that intelligibility should override nativelikeness in the teaching of pronunciation and that this argument should also apply to other areas of L2 spoken language instruction, including grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatics. In response, this *Expositions* explores more concretely how what Levis calls *intelligibility* may take shape in pragmatics-focused instruction in both the spoken and written modes and how this line of argument can be furthered in the context of the multilingual turn (May, 2014) in the larger field of applied linguistics.

More specifically, I aim to question native-speakerism and underscore the nature of multilingual interaction in which multilinguals play with their hybrid linguistic resources within their repertoire by mixing, meshing, or translanguaging to enrich their communication. Similarly, learners, as emergent multilinguals, can be guided to enhance such multilingual competence by taking advantage of their hybridity rather than simply aiming for perceived native-speaker norms. In other words, I intend to highlight the creativity and criticality in multilingual pragmatics, which teachers can promote in their classrooms.

A Learners-as-Ethnographers Approach in Teaching Pragmatics

An explicit awareness-raising approach (often called *learners-as-ethnographers*) has been shown to effectively accelerate learners' pragmatic development, which is otherwise slow-paced even in second-language environments, where learners are exposed to authentic language use outside the classroom (Bardovi-Harlig, 2017). Ethnographers typically participate in the new community of practice as participant observers, and engage in interaction with locals. While doing so, they aim to make sense of contextual, sociocultural, and linguistic cues involved in the interaction, and make constant adjustments to assumptions about norms of behavior they generate as part of the process of socialization.

Similarly, learners communicating in a second or foreign language context can be advised to pay attention to their conversational partners' language and behavior along with their sociocultural backgrounds and other signs of identities (e.g., the way they consider time and space, dress, or body language). They can be invited to extrapolate intended meanings based on these characteristics observed multimodally, respond accordingly in the course of the interaction, and revise their hypotheses regarding communication.

In classroom settings, teachers should guide learners to explicitly notice (Schmidt, 2001) both pragmalinguistic (language-focused) form and the sociopragmatic (culturally-focused) context and to develop pragmatic awareness of the relationship between the language structure being used and the function it serves within the context (i.e., *form-function-context mapping*). Although a range of language forms is taught in the conventional curriculum (e.g., varied formulations of advice such as *should*, *ought to*, *had better*, *might be better to*), primary focus is too often placed on the decontextualized introduction of such language structures.

In the explicit teaching of pragmatic awareness, in addition to form, learners should be guided to pay specific attention to context such as relative power and social and psychological distance between interactants, as well as the stakes involved in the situation (adapted from Brown & Levinson, 1987) and to understand the mechanisms of underlying language choices (for examples of how learners can demonstrate this understanding both visually and explicitly, see Ishihara, 2022). Many published pragmatic-focused lessons (e.g., Tarandis et al., 2020; Tatsuki & Houck, 2010) provide instructional strategies for fostering pragmatic awareness and enhancing pragmalinguistic skills in the classroom.

For example, requests are among the most frequently taught speech acts in L2 pragmatics instruction. Teachers can guide learners to notice different linguistic forms used to express requests (e.g., *could I*, *would you*, *do you mind*, *I was wondering if*) in authentic or natural(istic) language samples and simultaneously pay attention to the social context, including relative power and distance between the interlocutors and the severity of imposition created by the request. In other words, learners can be prompted to understand the interconnection between form and context. This type of instruction prompting learners to notice and produce socially appropriate forms can be viewed as pragmatics instruction focused on pragmalinguistics.

What is less widely implemented in today's globalized era is an instructional focus on sociopragmatic aspects, in which learners are encouraged to be aware of socially preferred or less preferred behavior, depending on the sociocultural climate. An example of potential consequences of sociopragmatic failure is a *microaggression* unintentionally communicated despite kind intent on the part of the speaker. Microaggressions can be understood broadly as insults, denigrations, or subtle acts of exclusion targeting not only individuals and communities of particular race and ethnicity but also of gender, sexual orientation, national or cultural affiliation, language status,

age, (dis)ability, and religious affiliation (Cho & Corkett, 2023; Sue & Spanierman, 2020). For example, speakers may mean well when they compliment visitors to Japan on their use of basic Japanese or chopsticks with the intention of building solidarity. While recently-arrived recipients of such compliments may feel gratified, long-term residents may derive an alienating message, namely that, based on their appearance or national origin, they are not expected to be socialized into local practices. Thus, learners and teachers alike need to constantly update their sociocultural awareness of how their meaning may be interpreted differently by interactants from different backgrounds. Learners may even discuss and practice how tactfully they should speak to others or respond in case they become a target of microaggressions (see Glasgow & Ishihara, in preparation).

Similarly, Takeuchi (2023a) showed how a Japanese politician assumed a lack of Japanese language competence on the part of an international journalist and code-switched from Japanese to English in a press conference, despite the fact that she was speaking in Japanese. This unwanted code-switching act was perceived as a linguistic microaggression as it discredited the journalist's legitimacy as a speaker and alienated her. This example underscores the importance of moving public awareness in Japan from the ideology of the nation-state (assuming a one-to-one correspondence between nation, ethnicity, and language) to increasingly prevalent multilingualism within Japan, a country traditionally represented as homogeneous even under the influence of today's globalization. Without mobilizing updated sociocultural knowledge, we can offend, insult, or hurt others' feelings through well-formed language. This type of sociopragmatic awareness can be addressed as part of pragmatics-focused instruction in addition to language-focused pragmalinguistic instruction.

Focusing on Metapragmatic Awareness: Towards Criticality in Pragmatics Instruction

L2 pragmatic instruction can be viewed as critical in nature in at least two ways. On the one hand, pragmatic language use is reflective of one's identities, as pragmatic choices are regulated through *metapragmatic awareness*. While pragmatic awareness is important, what distinguishes metapragmatic awareness from mere awareness is the criticality involved in the overarching orchestration. Similar to how *metacognition* refers to the superseding awareness that orchestrates functions of cognition, metapragmatic awareness can be defined as the higher-level, umbrella knowledge of pragmatics that enables us to monitor, coordinate, reflect on,

and adjust our pragmatic uses and agency. Following Liddicoat and McConachy (2019), this overarching awareness includes explicit knowledge of multilingualistic identities and agency that can be enacted or suppressed in the sociocultural structure.

For example, it is important that learners be critically aware of their position (i.e., where they place themselves and are placed by others in the L2 community) as they make pragmatic choices. They may wish to use the pragmatic norms preferred in the community in order to assimilate into the culture and gain access to the social capital valued in its institutions. As in the saying *When in Rome, do as the Romans do*, this may be regarded as a default strategy learners use as part of successful language socialization. Alternatively, learners may at times powerfully or strategically assert their hybrid identities by resisting or straying from perceived community norms in order to exert a unique in-between position (i.e., a phenomenon termed *pragmatic resistance*). Pragmatic resistance has been documented in a number of studies, in both imagined discourses (e.g., elicited through role-plays and retrospective verbal reports, Félix-Brasdefer, 2025) and natural settings (e.g., metapragmatic interviews, Takeuchi, 2023b) (for more information about pragmatic resistance, see Ishihara, 2019b, 2024). Examples can be found in Takeuchi (2023b), in which learners of Japanese reported deliberately avoiding the forms they identified as feminine to prevent sounding excessively “girly” in order to sound like themselves or be taken seriously.

Another aspect that deepens the understanding of pragmatic resistance is shown in McConachy (2023), who highlighted the emotions and moral judgments that accompany such resistance. McConachy’s own initial embodied experience of pragmatic resistance included strategically avoiding the first-person pronoun *watashi* in Japanese as an Australian surfer, because the form seemed overly stiff, serious, and uncool. The author argued that strong moral emotions, such as disgust and shame can lead to aversive reactions and unwillingness to participate in community norms. This supports the argument that pragmatic instruction requires sensitivity if it is to avoid imposing native-speaker norms on learners, and instead allow space for creative meaning-making as part of identity negotiation (Ishihara, 2024). Thus, pragmatic instruction should include the development of metapragmatic awareness with regard to one’s own (often negative) evaluative reactions to different linguacultural differences while aiming at managing such emotions in order to achieve non-judgmental mindfulness (McConachy, 2023).

The second aspect of criticality in pragmatics instruction relates to a critical unpacking of cultural essentialism. During pragmatic instruction, learners should sharpen their metapragmatic awareness not to *essentialize* (or stereotype) others or cultures by focusing solely on dominant linguistic or cultural features. A study by Ishihara and Porcellato (2021) showed how teachers themselves co-constructed such metapragmatic awareness through collaborative mediation while sharing and critically discussing a range of pragmatic uses in relation to power in the wider sociocultural structure. For example, in teachers' professional development, a multilingual teacher in the U.S. Midwest critiqued media or popular portrayal of Peninsular Spanish in the north and south. She stated:

In Spain, there are regional differences when it comes to pragmatics and culture, although they are not as marked as the TV shows and popular jokes portray. In the north, people tend to be more distant when it comes to physical contact, and in the south, people tend to be warmer when they greet each other and meet new people. Although these differences do exist, when stereotyped, they have negative consequences. For example, TV shows in Spain sometimes equate being more distant and being smarter and portray people from the south as humble and less cultured than people from the north. (p. 162)

This teacher described how some regional varieties of Spanish are associated with greater prestige, higher or lower levels of education, cultural sophistication, or more or less humane characteristics. She revealed how a standard language ideology was prevalent in Spain, potentially leading to marginalization and prejudice targeted at speakers of certain Spanish varieties. Ishihara & Porcellato (2022) argued that teachers need to possess this type of critical metapragmatic awareness of diverse social and linguistic practices across and within communities and address such complexities in the teaching of pragmatics. Otherwise, instruction risks becoming equivalent to essentializing cultures or communities, an outcome that would defeat the purpose of intercultural communication. If inappropriately displayed in pragmatic instruction, cultural essentialism or homogenization can lead to linguistic racism. Critically acknowledging the asymmetrical power assigned to different language varieties and pragmatic variation, teachers are more likely to support the linguistic rights of students whose language or pragmatic practices may be stigmatized or marginalized in their community.

Given that such critical metapragmatic awareness needs to be shared by teachers and learners of pragmatics alike, the next section discusses how pragmatics instruction is relevant to promoting linguistic justice, leading to the reconceptualization of L2 pragmatics as *multilingual pragmatics*.

Multilingual Pragmatics: Enriching Communication Through Creativity and Criticality

Let us first reflect on how multilinguals typically rely on resources from their linguistic repertoire. As part of the multilingual turn in applied linguistics (May, 2014), research has documented how multicompetence transcends linguistic borders allowing multilinguals to often switch, mix, and mesh their named languages, which are interconnected beyond surface manifestations to creatively and rhetorically negotiate meaning (Canagarajah, 2013; Li, 2018). In this translanguaging framework, translanguaging practice is viewed as a normal communicative activity, and language learners are more powerfully reconceptualized as (emerging) multilinguals rather than nonnative speakers in deficit.

An example of creativity in translanguaging can be found in Luo and Yu (2025), who show how elite students at top Chinese universities translanguaged in a social media platform, building rapport, and providing support for each other. Among rich multimodal translanguaging practices are the puns and memes they playfully used to self-deprecatingly refer to themselves, for example by playing on the Chinese word for “losers” (*fèiwù*) and its homophonic variant “five” in English in discussing university rankings. Their creative translanguaging served as their critique for the neoliberal style of fierce competition quantifying and ranking educational achievements, which one student characterized as social Darwinism. Many participants in the virtual community empathized with this and shared similar experiences and struggles while creating a safe space of mutual support, emotional healing, and resilience. The authors argued that participants’ narratives “create[d] a space for public contemplation and systemic critique, where community members collectively interrogate[d] and challenge[d] the fundamental inequities embedded in the elite education system” (p. 9). Their translanguaging was thus both creative and critical at the same time, while bolstering solidarity and countering dominant power structures in academia. Therefore, the translanguaging playfulness enhanced, enriched, and refined the interaction in a way that would not have been attainable in one named language alone.

Given the empowering features of translanguageing illustrated above, as (emergent) multilinguals, language learners can be guided to enhance their meaning-making by taking advantage of the multiple resources within their linguistic repertoire. Rather than dutifully aiming for perceived monolingual native-speaker norms that may be neither desirable nor achievable, learners should be encouraged to creatively weave their own tapestry with their multilingual threads beyond traditional linguistic boundaries. While doing this, learners should be invited to consider the potential outcomes of translanguageing within the given context. Such metapragmatic awareness will enable them to determine in what context to translanguage and for what purposes and what repercussions this might have as translanguageing may or may not be used effectively depending on the context.

In fact, translanguageing is no panacea in all social or educational settings. Translanguageing pedagogy can enable learners to benefit academically and metapragmatically provided their strong language is used in support of their full multilingual repertoire, part of which may be devalued in schools and societies through divisive language policies or language ideologies such as monolingual policies and native-speakerism. Yet translanguageing both inside and outside the classroom is also critiqued for the challenges it presents. Dovchin (2019) illustrated how marginalized multilinguals may be bullied, mocked, or discriminated against for non-standard language use that is often frowned upon. Translingual practice can be a source of linguistic racism and is sometimes romanticized to the point where it ceases to reflect the reality of multilinguals, who become targets of linguistic injustices and discrimination (Dovchin, 2019; Kubota, 2016). Moreover, marginalized multilinguals may hold a deficit view of their own minoritized languages (Steele et al., 2025) and, as a result, may not fully exercise their translingual repertoire. Due to unequal power relations, translingual individuals or communities can be either privileged or stigmatized.

Kubota (2016) argued that we need to become more aware of this asymmetry if we are to resist and counter the oppression that may accompany multilingualism. Modeling translingual practice in a positive light in the classroom may be part of the range of strategies capable of combating linguistic inequity (Rockell, 2019). With heightened metapragmatic awareness, multilinguals will be able to assess the power positioning in the sociocultural context and thus make informed choices as to when to translanguage and when not to in accordance with the demands of the sociocultural structure. For example, in a high-stakes situation such as a job interview, multilinguals may decide to refrain from translanguageing

to protect themselves from the risk of being marginalized based on their linguistic status. In an informal multilingual context, they may opt to translanguaging sensibly so as not to exclude others who do not share the same linguistic repertoire by providing a translation or metapragmatic explanation. Knowing the rhetorical benefits and social constraints of translanguaging is part of the metapragmatic awareness teachers can promote through instruction.

Conclusion

Because monolingual native speakerism has been the prevalent institutional norm (Li, 2024; May, 2014), many multilinguals, including multilingual language teachers, neither automatically approve of their own multicompetence nor promote multilingual practice in language education (Scott, 2016). In response, continuous reiterative reflection is called for in teacher development, if criticality and creativity of multilingual pragmatics are to be maximized (Ishihara et al., 2023). Multilingual teachers must be encouraged and nurtured in teacher development in order to support learners' multilingualism within and beyond the classroom walls (Ishihara, 2024).

The teaching of English, or of any language for that matter, is a political activity in itself, intertwined with issues of linguistic rights, linguistic and social justice, and values teachers bring to the classroom (Johnston, 2003). The teaching of pragmatics invariably reflects our beliefs and values around linguacultural diversity in today's sociocultural climate. Language educators need to collaborate in enhancing the metapragmatic awareness they share with learners, who will hopefully participate in a multilingual society that contributes to linguistic justice and appreciates creative multilingual practices.

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