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## Teaching Pragmatics in the EFL Classroom? SURE You Can!

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There are a number of language competencies which English language learners must develop, in tandem, in order to communicate successfully in English. Any successful communicative event, at least one that extends beyond expressions of simple, immediate need, will require that L2 speakers have developed some mastery of the syntax, morphology, phonology and lexis of the English language. Yet, as many English teachers recognize, and as many language learners have experienced first-hand, speech acts that are grammatically and phonologically correct sometimes fail because the learner's pragmatic competence—his or her ability to express or interpret communicative functions in particular communicative contexts—is undeveloped or faulty. Pragmatic incompetence in the L2, resulting in the use of inappropriate expressions or inaccurate interpretations resulting in unsuccessful communicative events, can lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication and can even leave the native-speaking interlocutor with the perception that the L2 speaker is either ignorant or impolite.

The following simple scenario illustrates the importance of pragmatic competence. Two learners of English ask a native speaker, with whom they are unacquainted, to lend them a pen. One learner uses the phrase, "Borrow your pen," while the other asks, "Could I borrow your pen?" Both requests are easy to understand. Both result in the desired response. Yet in this context native speakers would likely respond more favorably to the request of the second learner over that of the first, simply because it is more appropriate.

Parents know that pragmatic competence or contextual appropriateness does not always develop as quickly in their children as they might wish. Some years ago the first author and his wife would often visit friends who had a 4-year-old daughter. After visiting in their home for about 30 minutes or so, their daughter would invariably ask her mother, "Mommy, when are they are going to go home." Similarly, the first author's young son once blurted out at the beginning of a meal at his grandmother's house, after tasting the main course, "I tried it. I don't like it. I don't want anymore."

In theories of language acquisition, pragmatics has often been de-emphasized and shuffled aside under the rubric of syntactic knowledge and has gone unrecognized as a significant knowledge component in language learning. That tendency has begun to change significantly, however. In recent theories of communicative competence in L2 teaching, pragmatics features prominently (Kasper, 1996). Desselles' (1998) theory is a good example of this growing emphasis, as it highlights the importance of pragmatic competence in equipping L2 learners to use language appropriate to particular communicative events, to use the relevant utterances necessary for being considered a competent conversant, and to interpret meaning contextually.

A substantial and growing body of second language research has also focused on the importance of pragmatics. Much of that research has shown the need for specific and explicit classroom instruction in pragmatics. Tanaka (1997), for example, found that communicative effects of L2 learners' speech acts resulted from more than L2 grammatical, phonological and lexical usage and concluded that L2 learners need to acquire pragmatic competence in the social rules of speaking in order to achieve communicative competence. Similarly, in a study of adult L2 learners, Koike (1997) found that despite an excellent command of the L2 grammar and lexicon, adult learners often fail to use pragmatically appropriate expressions. If pragmatic competence is vital to successful communication, then it is also vital that English teachers help their learners acquire or at least become more aware of this important competence. Before making some modest proposals for how teachers can begin to do that in EFL classrooms, let's consider just what we mean by this term "pragmatics."

### **What is Pragmatic Competence?**

Kasper (1997, 2000) defines pragmatics as the study of how a speaker uses language in social interaction and its effect on other participants in the communicative event. David Crystal defines it as "the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication" (1985, p. 240). Elsewhere, Crystal has noted that pragmatics includes those "factors that govern our choice of language in social interaction and the effects of our choice on others" (1987, p. 120). Interlanguage pragmatics, then, is the study of non-native speakers' use and acquisition of L2 pragmatic knowledge (Kasper, 1996). Interlanguage pragmatics considers how pragmatic competence influences L2 learners' speech acts and how pragmatic competence develops in target language learning. Some skeptics have claimed that pragmatic competence cannot be taught and, as some have similarly claimed in the case of teaching language form, explicit focus on pragmatics in teaching is not necessary, as students will gradually absorb pragmatic

competence from their exposure to the target language. While we will not take the space here to give a full accounting of the research base, the conclusions one can draw from the research seem quite clear: even advanced learners of English exhibit significant gaps in L2 pragmatics, and both ESL and EFL learners appear to benefit from explicit instruction in pragmatics (Kasper, 1997; Kasper & Rose, 2001).

Pragmatic competence encompasses a variety of abilities in the use and interpretation of language in context (Bialystok, 1993). These include a speaker's ability to use language for different purposes (such as greeting, requesting, informing, demanding and so on), the speaker's ability to adapt or change language according to the needs or expectations of the listener or situation, and the speaker's ability to follow accepted rules; the maxims, if you will, for conversation and narrative.

Within our own social group, we normally find it quite easy to use language appropriate to a variety of communicative settings. This is because language is used in fairly regular ways. One source of this regularity is that members of social groups follow general patterns of behavior expected by the group. In social settings outside of our own social group, however, we are sometimes unsure whether the language we are using is appropriate and whether our interpretations of conversational events are accurate, even when we share the same first language with the outside group. When speakers from outside a social group use inappropriate utterances, even though syntax, vocabulary and pronunciation are accurate, the inside group notices that the social outsiders communicate in unexpected ways (though it would be rare, of course, for someone other than a language teacher or sociolinguist to label that deficit a problem with pragmatic competence).

Another factor contributing to the regularity of language use derives from the fact that people living in communities share certain non-linguistic knowledge and experiences which often allow interlocutors within these communities to interpret each other's utterances without the need for detailed explanation. A famous and familiar example from textual discourse is that of the children's clothing shop with the sign in the window stating, "Baby Sale—This Week Only!" Because of our pragmatic competence we know without asking that it is not babies which are on sale but rather items for babies. Another personal example is of an African student who studied at the authors' *alma mater* in the United States some 30 years ago. From the airport he took a bus to the small southern town where he would attend college. As he exited the bus, he saw across the street a supermarket with a large sign displaying the words, "WHITE STORE," and assumed that, based on his knowledge, the store was for white people only. In fact "White Store" was simply the name of a chain of supermarkets owned by a family with the surname White.

Of course, it is easy to see that pragmatic failure more readily occurs when significant differences exist in the cultural knowledge of interlocutors. Indeed, the absence of cultural knowledge (and it seems clear that pragmatic competence is a component of cultural knowledge) can cause one to appear offensive, even though accurate linguistic forms are used. Yule (1996) noticed this knowledge gap in his own language learning experience, reporting that he had “learned some linguistic forms in the language without learning pragmatics of how those forms are used in a regular pattern by social insiders” (p. 5). In the first author’s developing knowledge of Cantonese, he struggles with trying to determine appropriate language to use in making refusals. In certain communicative contexts, he is never quite sure if he should use “mh sai” (not necessary), “mh oi” (don’t like/love) or “mh yiu” (don’t need/want) in making the refusal. In the process of learning English, the second author remembers similar difficulties in differentiating the appropriate use of the phrases, “I’m sorry” and “Excuse me.”

### Four SURE Steps

A strong case can be made that pragmatic competence needs to be a focus of classroom instruction, even in contexts where English is studied primarily as a foreign language. We teachers should not view pragmatic competence as simply a bonus that can be added on if time and student interest allow. Indeed, in order to communicate successfully in the target language, some measure of pragmatic competence in the L2 is a necessity. But how do teachers in EFL settings, where there are relatively few opportunities for students to use the language in communicative contexts, begin to introduce students to pragmatics in English?

In answering that question, we suggest that teachers consider adopting the simple acronym S.U.R.E. to guide them as they help their students *See, Use, Review, and Experience* pragmatics in the EFL classroom.

#### See

*Teachers can help their students see the language in context, raise consciousness of the role of pragmatics, and explain the function pragmatics plays in specific communicative events.*

Many students do not know how to make polite requests in English in the classroom. On more than one occasion, for example, we have heard students of English use the single word, “repeat,” to request that teachers repeat something they have said. Training students in making requests (and in a whole variety of other functions needed

in the classroom) is a particularly useful way of raising student awareness of pragmatics at work.

Using a politeness continuum based on Brown and Levinson's (1978) work, we have developed a simple activity which illustrates one way of raising student awareness of pragmatics in English. In this activity, teachers first ask students what common requests they make in the classroom (of classmates and of their teacher). Eliciting the language of requests from students, the teacher then introduces the politeness continuum using a table similar to the one below:

Indirect: *I forgot my pencil. /My pencil's broken.*

Direct: *Lend me a pencil.*

Polite: *Could I borrow a pencil, please? /Would you mind lending me a pencil?*

Familiar: *It'd be terrific if I could borrow your pencil.*

After the teacher has explained and illustrated the politeness continuum, students make requests of each other using an activity sheet similar to this:

1. Polite: Ask a classmate to lend you his/her ruler. Measure this paper and write the width along with the classmate's name here.
2. Familiar: Ask a classmate to lend you 10 dollars. Write his/her name here.  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Indirect: Ask a classmate to lend you his or her pencil. Write his or her name here \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Polite: Ask a classmate to sign his/her name

Discussion of appropriateness and the politeness continuum should be conducted during a review at the conclusion of this simple activity to make sure that students are indeed more aware of the role of pragmatics when making requests in English. This approach could easily be adapted and expanded on in future classroom activities to further raise student awareness of pragmatics.

### Use

*Teachers can develop activities through which students use English in contexts (simulated and real) where they choose how they interact based on their understanding of the situation suggested by the activity.*

The primary goal of language teaching is to develop the communicative ability of our students. For that to happen, of course, students must have opportunity to use the

language. One important opportunity for that, of course, is through small group and pair activities in the classroom. As Olshtain and Cohen (1991) and others have pointed out, using role plays, drama, and mini-dialogs in which students have some choice of what they say provides students with opportunities to practice and develop a wide range of pragmatic abilities. For example, in certain contexts in the United States some compliments will be met with a devaluing of the item complimented. If, for instance, someone were to comment to her friend that she liked her handbag, it would not be unusual for the friend to reply that the handbag was old or that she purchased it on sale or that it was indeed nice but a bit too small. To prepare students for the activity, brief dialogs such as the following could be introduced.

1. A: I really like your handbag.  
B: This old thing? It's about to fall apart.
2. A: Wow! What a great car!  
B: Yeah, I love it, even if I did pay too much for it.

After the dialogs have been introduced, students would be instructed to work with a partner to develop two mini-dialogs containing a compliment followed by a response that downplays the value of the item complimented.

Another way to help students use their developing pragmatic knowledge in English is through role plays that require students to adjust what they say based on their relationship with their interlocutor. An example would be to ask students to work in groups of four in which one member of the group is assigned the role of a student wishing to borrow a particular book needed to complete an important school project due that next day. The other three students are assigned the role of the student's brother, friend or teacher. Each is instructed to interact using language appropriate to their role. The role plays can be performed for larger groups or for the whole class so that students can observe how the language and communicative strategies we use are affected by the relationship we have with the person with whom we are interacting.

## Review

*Teachers should review, reinforce, and recycle the areas of pragmatic competence previously taught.*

Kasper (1997) and others have made a strong argument that even in environments characterized by teacher-fronted classroom discourse (and we think it is safe to claim that this is the case for many English language classrooms around the world) opportunities for learning and reviewing pragmatics exist. One readily available opportunity is the language of daily classroom management. Unfortunately, some

teachers see classroom management and the language used in daily classroom management as outside of the English lesson, and many choose to conduct classroom management through the L1 rather than through English. In EFL contexts, where opportunities to use English for communicative purposes are limited, teachers should avoid the temptation to use the L1 for the daily tasks and interactions that classroom management requires. Through our discussions with English teachers from a variety of countries, we have found that a significant number have not considered the value of using English for classroom management. Not doing so wastes a valuable opportunity for students to review how English is used in the context of the classroom for real communicative purposes.

Using English for classroom management takes the language out of its all-too-common role as an abstract, lifeless linguistic system to study, and places it in the role of a real-life, breathing communication system. When teachers and students use English to complete common communicative functions in the classroom, such as requests, commands, openings, closing, refusals, apologies, and explanations, students' developing pragmatic knowledge can be reinforced through the common communicative events that take place daily in every EFL classroom. For example, in opening lessons and transitioning to new activities, teachers can choose from a variety of language choices, depending on the immediate context and need. Using language from a continuum of choices, such as those in the examples below, reinforces students' knowledge of how pragmatics and communicative situations are linked.

*Example Openings:*

Indirect: It's time to get started.

Direct: Sit down now.

Polite: Would you sit down, please?

Familiar: Boys and girls, it would be helpful if you could take a seat.

*Example Requests:*

Indirect: It's cold in here./I'm freezing.

Direct: Close/Shut the window.

Polite: Could you close the window, please?/Would you mind closing the window?

Familiar: Be a dear and close the window./Would you close the window for us?

**Experience**

*Teachers can arrange for their students to experience and observe the role of pragmatics in communication.*

Video is one of the richest resources teachers have for helping their students experience and observe pragmatics at work (for a fuller discussion, see Kasper & Rose, 2001). Films, television shows, and other video programs can provide us excellent resources for experiencing and analyzing language use in specific contexts. We have found situation comedies particularly good for this purpose when used with advanced secondary school and university students. These programs are relatively short (if you omit the commercials and the opening and closing credits, most American-made situation comedies are only about 20 minutes long). They also place characters in easily defined situations and allow students to observe the characters' language use within those situations. While the situations are not authentic, observing and analyzing the use of language within these simulated situations can provide students with vicarious experiences in the ways pragmatics permeates communicative events and contexts. Appendix A presents an example of this type of activity based on an episode of the popular American situation comedy, "Friends."

Other ways teachers can help students experience and observe pragmatics at work is to invite native-speaking guests to class to interact with students. After this experience, students can reflect on the language and mannerisms they observed the guest using. Arranging for students to interact with native speakers outside class and report on what they observed is another activity that can help students experience, observe, and reflect on the role of pragmatics when communicating in English.

### Conclusion

An EFL classroom can provide the context and the explicit instruction necessary for learners to begin developing pragmatic competence in English. If our goal as teachers of English is for our students to leave our classrooms with the ability, at least on some level, to communicate successfully in English, then we have to move beyond the bare bones approach to teaching language. We must put flesh and blood on those bones by using English for both classroom management and language instruction and by creating opportunities for students to see, use, review and experience the English language in communicative contexts.

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**Appendix A****\*Observing Pragmatics With *Friends***

1. Students watch *Friends* episode, *Pulling a Monica*.
2. Students watch segment containing compliment, apology, and relationship repair two more times.
3. Students discuss and answer the following questions in groups of 3 or 4:
  - a. Describe the context/situation in which Monica's mother compliments, apologizes, and seeks to repair her relationship with her daughter.
  - b. Describe Monica's mother's body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice.
  - c. Write down words or sentences she used to:
    - i. compliment
    - ii. apologize
    - iii. repair the relationship
4. In groups or pairs, students develop context for a role play similar to that seen in the video segment. Students perform role play.

\*For use with upper secondary/university students with better language proficiency.