Pragmatics From Research to Practice: Teaching Speech Acts

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Pragmatics: "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."
—Crystal, 1985, p. 364

Language teachers have long been aware of the devastating effect of learners' grammatically correct, yet situationally inappropriate spoken or written communication. The study of speech acts, first characterized by Austin (1962) and developed by Searle (1969), offers one resource for addressing some of these instances. However, although native speakers generally have a strong sense of what constitutes appropriate speech for those activities and events in which they participate in their own speech communities, this knowledge is usually unavailable at a conscious level (Kasper, 1997). Even native speakers of a language require information on how to talk about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate speech acts in different contexts.

Since the 1980s a body of research has accumulated on some of the characteristics of speech acts in a variety of languages, the most well known being the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP), a comparison of refusals and apologies across cultures (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). These studies typically focused on linguistic strategies (often categorized in terms of level of directness)—the formulas or grammatical structures used to realize these strategies, the modifiers that can be used to soften or intensify the act or strategy, as well as the sequential management of the act within an ongoing interaction. They have also investigated the effects of social factors such as distance or power relationships between the interlocutors and the degree of imposition or difficulty involved in performing the act. Additional research on interlanguage pragmatics

has not only identified strategies that do not conform to the target community norm, but suggested sources of these differences (e.g., effect of the first language [L1], learner proficiency level, learner reluctance to relinquish aspects of L1 identity).

Of primary relevance to English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers is the research on effectiveness of different types of pragmatic instruction on second language (L2) learner awareness, comprehension, and production (Alcón Soler, 2005; Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Kasper, 1997; Olshtain & Cohen, 1989; Rose, 2005; Takimoto, 2009). Although this research has profound relevance for language teachers, it is not easily accessible to those who are not deeply involved in the research literature. What is more, outside of dissertations and occasional conference presentations on effective teaching activities, with only a few exceptions (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Houck & Tatsuki, in press; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Tatsuki & Nishikawa, 2005; Uso-Juan & Martinez Flor, 2010), connections between the research and pedagogical practice have not been made available in a convenient form for the classroom.

Because native speakers do not have ready access to their own pragmatic competence, most classroom teachers who wish to teach some aspect of pragmatics need access to research results presented succinctly and clearly, with relevant information about how speech acts are performed. They need to know both the strategies and the grammatical forms generally employed, as well as how the social context (relationship to interlocutor, nature of the act) has been found to affect the choice of strategy or form and modifiers. They also need to be aware of variations in appropriateness norms among speech communities in general and in particular situations.

Once teachers are familiar with the strategies and forms generally used by native speakers in a particular community, they need to be able to determine what to teach and what level or type of competence to target with their students. Most importantly, they need access to effective materials and support for implementing the materials. This book attempts to address that need. Each chapter represents a set of field-tested activities, including (a) form-focused instruction on the act or sequence, as well as selected modification strategies; (b) awareness raising of the act and its modifiers; and (c) controlled and guided practice. Each chapter also offers extensive support for the teacher, with explanations of relevant characteristics of the act, along with notes on typical student problems, suggestions on how to implement activities, possible responses, and ideas for adapting the activities for different learner populations. Depending on learner characteristics (e.g., proficiency, need or desire to produce appropriate language), teachers may choose to use only selected awareness raising, identification exercises, or comprehension exercises.

The chapters in this volume provide information and activities primarily related to the realization of speech acts and the effect of different contexts on

their forms. The subsequent volume, *Pragmatics: Teaching Natural Conversation,* focuses on the role of formulas in performing speech acts and on the characteristics of longer sequences, along with the interactional acts involved in producing them fluently, coherently, and appropriately, as revealed by conversation analysis research.

Chapter 2, "Misunderstandings: Pragmatic Glitches and Misfires," by Virginia LoCastro, offers a variety of activities including a series of critical incidents to help raise learner awareness of the kinds of pragmatic gaffs that occur between nonnative-English-speaking (NNES) and native-English-speaking (NES) interlocutors. The activities focus on the actual experiences of NNES students in a large university community in the southern part of the United States where mismatches in initiations and responses of nonnative English speakers and native English speakers led to problems in their conversational interactions.

Chapter 3, "It's 8 O'clock in the Morning—Are You Watching Television? Teaching Indirect Requests," by Zohreh R. Eslami and Kent D. McLeod, acknowledges the potential for volatile misunderstandings if learners are unaware of the role of indirectness and mitigation in English requests. To address this possibility, Eslami and McLeod create a series of activities to guide learners to develop awareness of directness levels and the ability to interpret indirect requests. Later activities focus on identifying different types of requests, collecting and analyzing natural data, and practicing request strategies in role-plays.

Chapter 4, "I Want You to Help Me: Learning to Soften English Requests," by Carol Rinnert and Chiaki Iwai, is based on extensive research indicating that some learners may produce more direct requests with fewer softeners due to a misconception of the appropriateness of direct strategies among native English speakers. The sequence of activities suggested by Rinnert and Iwai includes a prelistening activity, a listening activity, and a final self-diagnosis report. Guidelines for teachers include a set of appropriate and inappropriate request formulations based on requests produced by students in Rinnert and Iwai's pilot study, which are intended to help guide teachers in analyzing their own students' requests.

Chapter 5, "Requesting a Letter of Recommendation: Teaching Students to Write E-Mail Requests," by Kumiko Akikawa and Noriko Ishihara, tackles the problem of inappropriate e-mails that can result in denial of students' requests due to the unintentional offense they cause. The activities familiarize students with the cultural norms of e-mail requests, such as appropriate terms of address and discourse components, through awareness-raising analytical tasks and peer-guided discovery, culminating in a cooperative production task. These activities benefit all adult learners who may need to request a recommendation letter or to make some other high-stakes request.

Chapter 6, "Soften Up! Successful Requests in the Workplace," by Lynda Yates and Jacky Springall, focuses on the complex environment of the workplace, which is replete with power differences and requires the use of a variety

of deference, rapport-building, and softening strategies. Because requests can be potentially risky even in one's native language, learners in the workplace need support and instruction at both the linguistic and the cultural level. Yates and Springall propose a series of activities that introduce the grammatical forms often used to soften requests and that also encourage cross-cultural comparisons.

Chapter 7, "Teacher, You Should Lose Some Weight: Advice Giving in English," by Noël R. Houck and John Fujimori, takes on students' apparently well-intentioned but sometimes disastrous attempts at advice giving. They begin with a diagnostic activity to discern students' current advice-giving skills and then systematically raise their awareness about and sensitivity to the levels of directness. In the final activities, students practice their newly honed advice-giving skills and consider tips on advice giving in general.

Chapter 8, "Moving Beyond 'In My Opinion': Teaching the Complexities of Expressing Opinion," by Kristin Bouton, Katy Curry, and Lawrence Bouton, notes the importance of developing the ability to recognize and express opinions appropriately. The activities, which were developed for an upper intermediate, nonacademic listening–speaking class, focus on two types of linguistic resources often used in the expression of opinions, but frequently ignored in discussions of opinion giving: (a) negative questions as opinions and (b) selected linguistic resources for softening and intensifying opinions.

Chapter 9, "Teaching Constructive Critical Feedback," by Thi Thuy Minh Nguyen and Helen Basturkmen, addresses the lack of attention to the language used to provide constructive critical feedback. The sequence of activities begins with awareness raising and the identification of feedback strategies, followed by activities designed to develop students' ability to recognize softeners and their sensitivity to directness levels. Students practice softening criticism by selecting appropriate softening markers to modify each turn in an academic writing advisory session. If teachers want to encourage peer editing and other collaborative learning activities, the preparation in this chapter is a must.

Chapter 10, "Indirect Complaints as a Conversational Strategy," by Dana Saito-Stehberger, notes that indirect complaining (grousing or griping) to a sympathetic ear is an integral part of the interactional life of some speech communities. In order to deepen social ties and enhance their ability to get to know others, learners need to become familiar with indirect complaints and their responses. The first activity raises learner awareness through a song by a "complaints choir," which is followed by another listening activity designed to practice recognition and identification skills. The third activity in the sequence focuses on responses with a special emphasis on commiseration, the most frequent response to indirect complaints in most English-speaking contexts. A matching and two guided-practice activities round out the chapter.

Chapter 11, "I'm Sorry—Can I Think About It? The Negotiation of Refusals in Academic and Nonacademic Contexts," by J. César Félix-Brasdefer and Kathleen Bardovi-Harlig, deals with refusals that are negotiated over several

turns of an interaction rather than as a single response to an initiating act such as an invitation or an offer. After raising awareness that there are many ways to say "no" in response to a request or suggestion or invitation, learners are given a chance to listen for and identify where the refusal occurs within a negotiation sequence and then to analyze the various strategies employed. The chapter directs the teacher to a website that has a series of refusal situations on video.

Chapter 12, "They Made Me an Invitation I Couldn't Refuse: Teaching Refusal Strategies for Invitations," by Emma Archer, suggests that because even native speakers find refusing invitations tricky to accomplish, learners of English need support and instruction in refusal strategies and in ways of softening them. Archer suggests that the teacher begin by eliciting refusals to an invitation and then perform a visual–kinesthetic demonstration of the effect of a direct refusal by dropping a "breakable" on a hard surface. This is followed up by a discussion of softeners and several activities to develop a range of refusal strategies that employ them. A final discourse completion task offers an opportunity for controlled practice.

Chapter 13, "Online Collaboration for Pragmatic Development—Talkpoint Project," by Emi Yamanaka and Kenneth Fordyce, outlines an innovative series of collaborative activities used online with a Web-based teaching tool called Talkpoint. This is a unique opportunity for learners to have access to authentic and appropriate language examples, which "can then become the object of reflection, analysis, and discussion via direct communication with target language speakers in a partner class" (p. 196). Although the site offers opportunities on a wide range of speech acts and responses, the chapter outlines activities related to refusal situations.

Chapter 14, "Assessing Learners' Pragmatic Ability in the Classroom," by Noriko Ishihara, provides a set of rubrics for assessing learners' pragmatic ability in the target language. The chapter uses research-based information about how speech acts are actually realized to assess both pragmatic production and pragmatic assessment while raising pragmatic awareness. Assessment rubrics range from pure teacher assessments to teacher–learner collaborations to peer- and self-evaluations.

This volume on *Pragmatics: Teaching Speech Acts* makes a significant contribution to materials available to teachers who wish to teach speech acts. A few general comments are in order. It should be kept in mind at all times that pragmatic norms vary greatly not only between English-speaking countries, but within speech communities. Although the contributors have trialed these materials in classrooms around the world, for the most part, the norms represented in this volume are those of North American speech communities.

Furthermore, while the role of this volume is to provide materials for English teachers to raise learners' awareness of the norms of a set of English-speaking communities, we are not suggesting that learners should be required to follow these norms. Once they are aware of how the acts are performed by members of

a relevant community, they can choose to adopt the forms or not. In addition, we are also not suggesting that it is solely the nonnative speaker's responsibility to adjust to local speakers' expectations (although see Cohen, 2008, for a persuasive argument for encouraging nonnative speakers to do so). Ideally, through contact with nonnative speakers, native speakers' awareness of different ways of doing things with words will also be raised, leading to beneficial relationships of mutual respect and acceptance.

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