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PRAGMATICS-BASED LESSONS FOR LOW-LEVEL ADULT ELLS

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Introduction

Having pragmatic ability means being able to understand or interpret the meanings of words or utterances beyond their literal meaning (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Yule, 1996). Developing pragmatic ability can be a challenge for any language learner, and especially so for low-literacy level learners who are thrust into a new speech community early in their language acquisition process. The field of second language (L2) pragmatics has focused largely highly literate and university-level students (Ishihara, 2006; Takahashi, 2001; Tateyama, 2001; Yoshimi, 2001); however, researchers have stressed the benefits of instruction in L2 pragmatics for students at the very beginning stages of language learning as well (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Yates, 2004). In an effort to increase pragmatic ability and communicative competence for our low-level English language learners (ELLs) studying in an adult basic education (ABE) program we developed a series of pragmatics-based lessons that had a workplace theme. The learners for whom these lessons were designed were immigrants and refugees largely from east Africa and Southeast Asia, and most were either working in entry-level jobs or looking for employment. These pragmatics-based lessons and materials were intended to increase learners' awareness of pragmatic

norms in the workplace, to help learners notice how certain speech acts are performed, and to help learners communicate more effectively earlier in their language acquisition process. This article will contextualize the need for early L2 pragmatics instruction by briefly discussing pragmatic failure, and then explore the literature on L2 pragmatics instruction and recommended instructional techniques in adult education, and finally explain the pragmatics-based lessons.

Pragmatic failure

If L2 learners are unaware of or choose to not use specific linguistic features in a given social context they may be perceived as being impolite, rude, awkward, or abrupt. Garcia (2004) defines pragmatic failure as a speaker's inability to produce utterances that match their intended meaning. Researchers have found that interlocutors are more forgiving of linguistic and grammatical errors, but tend to judge speakers on a more personal or social level if they make pragmatic errors (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Ishihara, 2010). A speaker can realize the effects of pragmatic failure in a highly personal manner. When L2 learners produce grammatically correct, but pragmatically inappropriate or awkward utterances, their "behavior can be interpreted as a manifestation of their individual character" (Ishihara, 2010, p. 939). This is of particular concern for low-level L2 learners who interact with their speech community early in their language acquisition process. In her discussion of the challenges that immigrants and refugees who have limited English-speaking abilities face, Bailey (2006) points out that, "Initial perceptions of individuals are often based on very brief speech samples" (p. 120). Explicit instruction in the pragmatic norms and expectations of a given speech community can help reduce pragmatic errors and increase effective communication.

L2 pragmatics instruction

The goal of L2 pragmatics instruction is to make learners aware of norms and expectations in a specific speech community, and equip them with the knowledge of how to use the language in specific social circumstances if they choose to do so. Researchers (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Yates, 2004) agree that a combination of awareness-raising tasks and explicit instruction are necessary components of L2 pragmatics instruction.

Awareness-raising activities

The literature on L2 pragmatics instruction suggests raising learners' attention to linguistic forms and noticing language features in specific social contexts in a speech community (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Yates, 2004). These researchers have found that when learners observe, analyze, and practice how specific speech acts are performed in a particular context, they become more pragmatically competent. A speech act is an utterance that serves a certain social function in communication such as apologizing, offering a greeting or making a request, refusing things/invitations, or complimenting (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquistion [CARLA], 2012; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010.) Participating in awareness-raising activities help to develop learners' ability to analyze language and culture. Awareness-raising activities are supported by Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (1993) that claims one must pay attention to input in order for learning to occur. Essentially, once learners pay attention to certain elements in language, they begin to internalize and produce language as they have observed it.

Eslami-Rasekh (2005) states that the aim of awareness-raising activities is to "expose learners to the pragmatic aspects of language (L1 and L2) and provide them with the analytical tools they need to arrive at their own generalizations concerning contextually appropriate language use" (p. 200). Awareness-raising activities encourage the use of

learners' first language as well as the target language to help learners identify differences in speech acts (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005). Either the L1 or the L2 can be used to facilitate "reflection, comparison and sensitive discussion of sociopragmatic values and pragmalinguistic resources" in languages and cultures (Yates, 2004, p. 15). Awareness-raising activities help learners become more cognizant of the language practices in a speech community, as well as those of their first language and culture.

In their book on teaching and learning pragmatics, Ishihara and Cohen (2010) offer a number of awareness-raising tasks that have either a social and cultural (sociopragmatic) focus or a linguistic (pragmalinguistic) focus. Some sociopragmatic tasks include:

> • analyzing language and context to identify the goal and intention of the speaker;
> • analyzing and practicing the use of directness/politeness/formality in an interaction;
> • identifying and using a range of cultural norms in the L2 community
>
> (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, p. 114)

Examples of pragmalinguistic tasks include:

> • analyzing and practicing the use of vocabulary in the particular context, and
> • identifying and practicing the use of relevant grammatical structures and strategies for a speech act
>
> (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, p. 113)

Explicit instruction

Researchers (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Tateyama, 2001; Yates, 2004; Yoshimi, 2001) have found explicit instruction on linguistic forms and meaning to be more beneficial to learners than just being exposed to input without an analysis or direct instructional component. Explicit instruction, as described by Frank (2011), includes a thorough explanation of concepts, a model of proficiency, sufficient guided practice activities, and many opportunities for mastery and transfer. There is agreement among these researchers that learners need to be exposed to authentic input in contextually relevant settings. Explicit instruction makes use of direct instruction on form and meaning, and on noticing those forms in authentic situations.

Instructional techniques for adult ELLs

As stated earlier, the field of L2 pragmatic instruction has largely focused on students with highly developed language skills and less so on adult learners in the beginning stages of acquiring English. Therefore, the design of these pragmatics-based lessons drew upon recommended techniques for teaching L2 pragmatics, as well as techniques for teaching low-level adult ELLs. The lessons were designed for two levels of learners – high-beginner and intermediate – as defined by the ABE program in which we worked. While there was an emphasis on speaking and listening, all tasks and activities had a transcript or printed component to reinforce the connection between oral and written language.

Recommended teaching techniques for adult learners include creating interactive, communicative classes with a focus on language-awareness in real-world contexts (Bailey, 2006; Moss, 2005; Parrish, 2004; Savignon, 2001). Parrish (2004) suggests designing integrated and contextualized lessons that focus on meaningful classroom communication, by incorporating interactive-speaking activities, such as mingle tasks, discussions, and role-plays. In her discussion on creating interactive classroom activities, Moss (2005) offers ordering and sorting activities, including ranking and sequencing, and working in pairs to do problem-solving activities. Language-awareness components can be incorporated into lessons by focusing on language competencies and language functions (Parrish, 2004). Yates (2004) adds that learners need the "space to reflect upon and experiment

with new ways of interacting in a safe and non-threatening environment" (p. 15). Speaking outside of the classroom can be intimidating and challenging for language learners. Tasks and activities inside the classroom should be designed to give learners the confidence to try new forms and phrases, to ask questions, and to discuss language features.

The learners

These lessons and materials were designed for two groups of learners, many of whom had low or limited literacy skills in their home language(s), limited or interrupted formal education, and many obligations outside of their studies such as work and family. The classes comprised of mostly women, aged 20 to 60. The highest level of education completed in their home countries ranged from eighth grade to high school. The ABE program placed learners in levels based on the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) test. The high-beginner group was considered level 2 and had CASAS scores ranging from 201-210 and the intermediate group was considered level 4 and had scores between 221-230.

Instructional materials development project

Five lessons and materials were developed that focused on five different speech acts within a workplace theme. Learners were given a pretest prior to the lessons and a post-test after the lessons to evaluate their learning. In developing the materials we gathered speech samples from native speakers (NS) in the local speech community through a discourse completion task (DCT) and then used those speech samples in creating conversations for analysis and guided practice. We relied on authentic speech samples to develop our material rather than our own intuition because we know that how we think we communicate is not always consistent with how we actually communicate (Ishihara and Cohen, 2010).

First, we identified five speech acts: *requests, refusals, apologies, compliments*, and *complaints*.

Second, we wrote scenarios to elicit speech samples from NS through a DCT. Example scenarios on the DCT included:

> "Your boss asked you to work extra shifts this weekend. You don't want to work, because you need to help your family. Tell him that you can't work this weekend."
> "You need a day off from work to go to a meeting at your child's school. Ask your boss for a day off."
> "Your friend at work is wearing nice clothes today. Tell her she looks nice."

Third, the NS responses were compiled and organized. This information was used to write five lesson plans with differentiation features for the two levels of learners.

The following lesson plan template was used for each lesson:

Objective: consider the social/cultural or linguistic goals of your lesson
Warm-up: questions, sound clip, video clip, print sources
Pre-teach vocabulary
Presentation of material for analysis: sound or video clip, print source
Discuss language analysis questions
Explicit Instruction on linguistic forms and meaning
Controlled practice/semi-controlled practice: reading conversations, matching activities, cloze activities, putting conversations into correct order
Communicative/independent practice: role plays, writing dialogs
Wrap up

While we were creating the lessons we administered a pretest DCT to learners. The pretest contained the same scenarios as the DCT administered to the NS.

Fourth, we delivered the five lessons over a five-week period.

Finally, we administered a post-test DCT to learners and compared responses to pretest DCT. (See Appendix A for the requests lesson plan.)

We presented audio clips and transcripts of the dialogs, so the learners could simultaneously see and hear the language. In order to scaffold the language analysis component of the lessons for our learners, we presented simple comparisons of language features as polite/impolite phrases, more direct/less direct, nice/rude, good/bad, and positive/negative. These categories created a framework for learners to identify the feelings or meanings or tone of specific phrases and language features in certain contexts. Often these categories were presented in a T-chart, or utterances or phrases were analyzed on a continuum on the whiteboard, which helped learners identify which phrases carried certain meanings in certain situations. These tasks followed the recommendations from Ishihara and Cohen (2010) for analyzing and practicing how directness, politeness, and formality are used in communication. By scaffolding the language analysis aspect of the lessons in this way, learners also developed some meta-language skills, which helped them talk about the language.

Discussion

In general the lessons and materials successfully made the learners more aware of specific phrases and pragmatic norms in the local speech community. The information in the lessons and materials was presented as examples they may hear in the local speech community, and never as a rigid, prescriptive norms that had to be followed. The students were responsive and enthusiastic when they noticed specific features or had certain phrases and contexts explicitly explained to them.

We found that some learners still wrote very direct responses on the post-test DCT.

Example 1

Pre-test response- learner 1: "I'm sorry today I cannot work because I go to school my son."
Post-test response –learner 1: "I am sorry. I need a day off from work, because I have a meeting at my child's school. Can you help me?"

In Example 1 the post-test response still used, *"I need..."* which was presented as quite direct, but did offer a reason (a meeting at the child's school) and a modal verb *"can"* which was presented as a politeness marker. We speculated that they may have needed more frequent reviews of language features learned in previous lessons and that they might have responded differently to the post-test DCT items had oral recordings been available.

It should be noted that learners' responses to the DCTs were in written format, when the instruction was intended to increase learners' oral pragmatic communication skills. Many of our learners had stronger oral skills than written skills, so in some instances we felt that the DCTs did not fully capture their oral pragmatic skills. We were aware of this inconsistency when designing the project, but we decided to use the DCTs rather than an oral recording due to time and logistical constraints. Some of the learners in the high-beginning class orally dictated their responses to the instructor who wrote down their responses.

Conclusion

The adult ELLs who participated in this project, and others whom we have taught over the years, generally have a great sense of urgency about acquiring English language skills. They want and need to know the language in order to find

and keep jobs, and to communicate with school officials and other community members. So many of them are called upon early in their language acquisition process to communicate in authentic settings, it only seems fair to incorporate pragmatics instruction in beginning-level classrooms. This practitioner report provides a framework for incorporating pragmatics instruction in low-level adult language classrooms in order to raise learners' awareness to the pragmatic norms of their speech community and to equip them with information that can help them communicate effectively.

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Appendix A

Pragmatics-based Lessons for Low-level Adult ELLs
Rhonda Petree

Requests Lesson Plan

Objective: Students will be able to make a request in a workplace environment.

Warm up:
Directions: Write or project these questions on the board. Have students discuss with partners or in small groups. Then discuss as a class. Write some of the answers on the board.

1. How do you get your boss's attention?
2. How do you ask your boss to change your schedule?

Vocabulary: Preteach *appreciate*

Presentation:
Directions: First, read the situation to the class. Then, listen to the conversation using an audio file link. Then display the conversation on the projector or write on the board and discuss as a class. Talk about "sure" to mean "yes" and "hmm" as a pause in the conversation and to show "thinking." Use the questions at the end as a guide for language analysis. For question 1, she gets his attention by saying, "Say, Daniel..." For question 2, the past continuous tense is used to soften the request so it's not so direct. Discuss "direct" vs. "indirect" language.

Situation: Sue has been working the third shift (night shift) for the past 2 years. Now she wants to ask her boss if she can work the day shift. She wants to be home at night with her family.

Conversation:
Sue: Say, Daniel, *I was wondering* if it'd be possible to talk to you about my schedule.
Daniel: Sure. I'm free now.
Sue: *Well, I was hoping* you could change my schedule to the day shift so I could be home with my family more at night.
Daniel: Hmm…Let me think about it.
Sue: Okay. *If you could* get back to me soon I'd appreciate it. Thank you.
Daniel: All right. I'll let you know by Friday.

Discussion Questions:
1. How does the worker (Sue) get the boss's attention?
2. Why does she say "*I was wondering…*" and "*I was hoping…*"?

Explicit Instruction:
Directions: Discuss and write on the board the examples below which can be used to make a request. Then have the students add some of their own (ideas include: *would like to be considered, I am interested, I would like the position*).

1. I *appreciate* my position…..

2. I would *LOVE* to switch……

3. I'm *really* enjoying my job, but if there is an opportunity ...

Controlled Practice Lower-Level:
Directions: Project or write the situation on the board. First, students read the situation. Next, students read along as the teacher reads the conversation. Then, students read the conversation on their own. Last, students cut out the sentences on the dotted lines and put them in the correct order.

Situation: Sue needs a day off from work to go to a meeting at her child's school.

Conversation:

Sue	**Kia**
Excuse me, Kia ...	Yes, Sue.
I'm wondering if it would be possible to have Thursday off?	Hmm…possibly ...
I need to go to a meeting at my child's school.	Oh, okay. Just fill out the form for a day off.
Thank you Kia.	You're welcome.

Controlled Practice Higher-Level:
Directions: Project or write the situation on the board. First, students read the situation. Next, students read along as the teacher reads the conversation. Then, students read the conversation on their own. Last, students cut out the sentences on the dotted lines and put them in the correct order.

Situation: Sue needs a day off from work to go to a meeting at her child's school.

Conversation:

Sue	**Kia**
_____ Kia.	_____.
_____ _____ have Thursday off?	Hmm ... possibly ...
_____to go to a meeting at my child's school.	_____. Just fill out the form for a day off.
_____ Kia.	You're welcome.

Communicative Practice:
Directions: Project or write the situations on the board. Students should work individually or with a partner to create a dialogue for the situation. Then they role play the conversation for the class.

> *Situation 1:* You are applying for a new job. You need some references for the job application. You have been a good employee at your current job. Ask a co-worker or supervisor if you can use them as a reference.

> *Situation 2:* You want to take 3 weeks off this summer to visit your family in your home country. However, the summer is one of the busiest times of year at your job. Ask your supervisor for the time off.