

Expanding opportunities for social language and social inclusion among adult learners

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This article explores how research on the teaching of pragmatics, specifically as it relates to the use of explicit and implicit instruction, can serve as a guide for expanding the instruction of social language to immigrant students in Australia as well as other students. The curriculum and expectations from the Australian Migrant English Program (AMEP) are used as an example, but teachers working in similar programs can benefit as well. Several activities specific to explicit and implicit instruction are used to illustrate how to teach social language to learners from beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels of proficiency.

Key words: AMEP; explicit and implicit instruction; pragmatics; second language acquisition; teaching social language

Introduction

The importance of establishing high levels of English proficiency (Blake, 2017) and pragmatically appropriate skills is noted by many researchers (Major et al., 2022; Musgrave & Bradshaw, 2014). In a recent study, Major et al. (2022) draw on the concept of social inclusion to explore the ways in which the use of social language includes or excludes immigrant workers in Australia. Social inclusion is a term used broadly by Major et al. (2022) to describe “access to services and general social services...as well as a sense of connectedness and belonging” (p. 250) among English learners. The authors found that their participants—immigrants in Australia—felt excluded across a variety of social situations at work. When given the opportunity, they were very motivated to use English and improve their speaking and listening skills. In addition to gaining equal opportunity at their work, they hoped to improve their skills in using social language or pragmatic abilities (e.g., making greetings and small talk, scheduling appointments, and making refusals).

While the emphasis within the AMEP curriculum is on preparing students to enter the workplace and settle in a new country, it also prepares immigrants to interact within the cultural traditions of Australian life via attention to the ways in which the social language transcends a variety of settings. Topics across all levels include money, education, health, housing, a new life, transport, work, environment, leisure, and the law. Implicit in all these topics are opportunities to explore pragmatically appropriate social use of language. The curriculum, for instance, for intermediate students—the most advanced level—includes lessons on agreeing, disagreeing, and making suggestions. Interestingly, while plans for instruction have been discussed in the AMEP (2022) curriculum, little has been drawn from the field of teaching pragmatics. This is in spite of ample pragmatics research which confirms gains learners make in communication, specifically regarding the use of social language and an understanding of culture (Yousefi & Nassaji, 2021). Instead, in the AMEP curriculum, individual teachers are able to make decisions about the use of social language in relation to culture. For instance, in the first lesson of a four-part unit on education (for the full list of lessons available to instructors see AMEP, 2022), the students are asked to read a dialogue between a guidance counsellor and a student who would like to take a course on childcare. The dialogue is presented in the form of a cloze exercise, requiring the students to select from a list of vocabulary words and complete the sentences with missing words. The remaining exercises query the students on the contents of the dialogue and present exercises on the use of phrasal verbs. Missing is a discussion of how the student can successfully respond to requests, make refusals or ask questions within a school setting with their peers, teachers, or administrators. Teachers who spot this gap in the curriculum are left to develop instruction on their own around the questions of how social language varies across different contexts and speakers and how it might best be taught.

This article offers guidance on the instruction of pragmatics which is relevant to AMEP teachers. The blend of explicit and implicit instruction used in the instruction of pragmatics is put forward as a complement to the AMEP curriculum (see AMEP, 2022). Following a description of explicit and implicit instruction, examples of how explicit and implicit instruction might be used in the classroom are given to advance students' opportunities to explore the use of social language.

Explicit and Implicit Instruction

According to Taguchi (2015), explicit instruction is a powerful approach because it involves the teacher in providing overt instruction about a specific form of language—for example, making an introduction or offering a greeting—and following up with opportunities for various forms of guided practice. Students can make connections between the communicative task and context and then form a response which meets

their needs. A drawback of explicit instruction is the absence of an opportunity for students to puzzle over the question of how or why language is used in a given setting or context and consider how it might differ from their own first language. Implicit instruction engages students in analysing carefully selected examples of the target language forms and, in the absence of formal instruction, describe what they believe guides how language is used in each situation. The emphasis is on the teacher providing a loosely guided experience in which the students can puzzle over how language is used and think about how it might compare with their native language. From there, the teacher might provide recasts of the students' responses and careful feedback, as well as ask them to deduce a response.

While research tends to cast explicit versus implicit instruction as an either-or dilemma, Taguchi (2015) points to the value of a blended approach to instruction, drawing on the strengths of both in the classroom. For the AMEP teacher, the 'puzzling' over social language that is at the core of implicit instruction addresses a gap in the AMEP curriculum, while explicit instruction provides a basis for structuring those examinations.

Examples of Teaching Activities

Student-as-researcher in media

The objective of the student-as-researcher is for students to begin collecting short examples of social interactions that can later be used for class discussion. The activity is an implicit form of instruction which provides a natural starting point for discussions, and questions that can be followed up with more directed explicit instruction. Because social language is complex, narrowing the search is necessary. Good targets for AMEP beginners to explore in social language are greetings and forms of address. They may involve only a few words or phrases, yet allow the students to learn something about how status and language are connected. Address forms such as 'Mr.', 'Professor' or 'Dr.' can be quickly identified by students and added to their verbal repertoires. For intermediate students, refusals are good choices. They vary from a single word, 'no,' to extended sentences with complex grammatical structures. Examining the reasons for the different choices can add nuance to the students' use of language as well as provide a conduit to exploring how refusals vary across cultures and languages.

Sitcoms, movies, and various clips from different kinds of social media can provide an excellent source for dialogue. These clips can also be very motivational if the students are familiar with the shows or movies. Elola and Oskoz (2017) explain that video-based media can provide opportunities for students to explore changes in mode, genre, voice, and social relationships. Moreover, according to Gee and Hayes (2011),

the use of video-based media can support L2 development while allowing students to examine language use across a number of different settings and audiences. If structured properly, the student-as-researcher task should encourage the students to notice and hypothesise about how social language varies across different cultures and speakers.

In order to provide a strong example, the teacher can initially select several video clips. ChatGPT is a particularly powerful tool that the teacher or students can use to conduct searches across various platforms of social media and print media according to specific parameters. Clips can be chosen in relation to any of the content areas focused on by the AMEP curriculum: learning English, money, education, health, housing, a new life, transport, work, the environment, leisure, law, and community. YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok can be excellent sources for examples, too.

Building on AMEP

Because the student-as-researcher activity is a form of implicit instruction, teachers are encouraged to offer a guided experience by directing students' attention to key contrasting elements in the text which allow them to consider their reasons for different use. For beginners, activities can guide students on identifying how address forms and greetings differ in their use between their home language and English. Identifying situations in which different address forms and greetings are appropriate or not is one suggestion. Intermediates can similarly identify how greetings and address forms vary across different contexts. They can be encouraged to categorise what they believe are polite versus impolite refusals and speculate about the broad reasons as to why. Across all groups, groupwork can be encouraged as a means of encouraging students to hypothesise about how social language is structured and used.

Metapragmatic instruction and focused practice

As a follow-up to the student-as-researcher activity, metapragmatic instruction and focused practice are helpful. These are explicit forms of instruction in which the teacher gives direct instruction on how social language—refusals and greetings, in this case—varies with the status of the speakers. Taguchi (2015) argues that learners who are directly taught or given a chance to deduce pragmatic rules are at an advantage when compared with their peers who are only exposed to the rules. The emphasis on providing direct instruction will give students the opportunity to notice and consciously process the pragmatic forms.

Metapragmatic instruction is most often followed by or paired with focused practice. Focused practice may include activities such as translation, closed role-play, or an open-ended task in the form of a role play or writing an essay, letter, or email. In

terms of its relationship to learning, Li's (2012) meta-analysis demonstrates that focused practice is best utilised when it follows metapragmatic instruction. Teachers may see results from a pairing of metapragmatic instruction with focused practice in just five hours of instruction.

Below, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* is used to illustrate metapragmatic and focused practice in the classroom. The *Harry Potter* book and movie series is an excellent source for materials on the use of social language. Since the release of the first novel, the series has maintained a world-wide audience (Hooper et al., 2002). It is well suited for the Australian audience, as well as immigrants living in Australia. Australians represent the second-largest audience for the purchase of the *Harry Potter* series (Hooper et al., 2002). Written in British English and steeped in British cultural mores, J.K. Rowling's imaginative series provides the English language teacher with myriad possibilities for exploring the use of social language against a fascinating cultural backdrop. More specific to the needs of Australian teachers, the characters must vary the ways they use social language as they speak with their peers, some of whom they like and others they dislike, and administrators, all of whom are of a much higher status. Their use of greetings and address forms provides a good starting point for beginners to explore how social language varies.

The following two examples from Rowling (1998) illustrate how Harry modulates his use of address forms and greetings from the highly formal choices used with Professor Dumbledore, the most respected professor and wizard at the Hogwarts school, to the less formal choices with Neville, his classmate at Hogwarts. Harry is the main character in the book and is a new student to Hogwarts school. The first example takes place at Hogwarts where Harry is attending the welcoming dinner at the Great Hall, a place for the most serious and formal occasions. Professor Dumbledore will give the opening address. Harry sees Professor Dumbledore just before the start of the ceremony. The brief exchange from Rowling (1998) follows.

HARRY: "Professor Dumbledore, sir," Harry says, giving a small bow.

DUMBLEDORE: "Welcome to Hogwarts", Mr. Potter, Dumbledore replies kindly. "I hope you will enjoy your time here."

HARRY: "Thank you, sir." Harry says, feeling awestruck by the powerful wizard's presence (p. 98).

While this is the second time they have met, Professor Dumbledore's status at Hogwarts as well as the auspicious context of the ceremony necessitates Harry's choice of address and greetings. The greeting is a three-part form which includes the use of the title 'professor', plus the last name, followed by 'sir.' A small bow, perhaps

as a replacement for a verbal greeting is added and shows his respect for Professor Dumbledore. While their relationship grew and Harry came to admire Dumbledore a great deal throughout the book, the use of the formal address forms remained constant in the interactions between Harry and Professor Dumbledore.

In another scene, students attend a ceremony in which they are sorted into one of four houses: Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, or Slytherin. Houses are groups into which students are placed during their studies at school. This ceremony also takes place in the Great Hall. Harry is anxious to learn which group, or house, he will be placed in. The sorting hat, a magical hat that is used to sort the students into the different houses, sings and begins to match the students to their houses. Just then, Harry looks over to Neville. Neville, who is a bit shy, looks away. A few moments later, Neville introduces himself.

- NEVILLE: "H-h-hi, I'm Neville Longbottom."
- HARRY: "Hi, I'm Harry. Nice to meet you."
- SEAMUS: "I'm Seamus Finnigan. You must be the famous Harry Potter!"
- HARRY: "Uh, I guess so."
- SEAMUS: "I've heard all about you. You survived You-Know-Who's curse, and now you're going to Hogwarts. Brilliant!"
(Rowling, 1998, p. 78).

The use of informal greetings is evident. Both boys state their first names, and Harry adds a polite greeting. Seamus jumps in, states his first name and happily recognises Harry and his fame. Harry is modest, but Seamus continues with his praise of Harry's courage. The exchange continues for several more turns with Neville joining in praising Harry. Seamus and Neville next exchange their views on why Gryffindor is the best house. What is significant about how social language is used is that neither Harry nor his classmates have formal titles, and so they are absent in their dialogues. They refer to each other by their first names or simply omit the name in their statements.

Why are these kinds of dialogues valuable? The use of the short phrases for greetings and address forms gives students at beginner and intermediate levels immediate illustration of how address forms and greetings change according to the status of the speakers and the context. Metapragmatic instruction can include comparing address forms between teachers and friends. This can be expanded to other address forms that are connected to the AMEP curriculum such as those used in medicine and law. Instruction on when it is appropriate to speak with someone on first-name basis can

follow, noting that it may require permission when speaking with professors, teachers, or doctors but is never appropriate in legal settings such as in front of a judge.

Instruction can then turn to greetings. While Harry is the one person who offers a greeting, he gives a generic greeting which is appropriate across status levels and so this is an exchange that is well suited for metapragmatic instruction. In terms of focused practice, greetings and introductions are an ideal venue for the use of role plays. Students at all levels can create, watch and perform role plays in which they vary the status of speakers and contexts. Intermediates may wish to expand greetings by commenting on something they know about their conversation partner as was seen in the discussion Harry Potter had with his friends.

CONCLUSION

The examples above suggest that the instruction of pragmatics offers a natural extension of the AMEP curriculum, offering helpful implications for instruction. For the interested teacher, the creative integration of explicit and implicit instruction is key. Implicit instruction is open-ended and provides a conduit for all students to participate in learning about a new or unfamiliar topic. It is a good place to begin instruction. Explicit instruction directs students' attention through focused practiced and metapragmatic discussions. Popular media complements the focus on oral language in pragmatics and builds the kind of connectedness and belonging discussed in Major et al., (2022) that is both expansive and transcendent of the students' lives.

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