

# Integrating Pragmatics Instruction in a Content-Based Classroom

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The issue of teaching pragmatics in foreign and second language classrooms has received a lot of attention in the recent years. Its origins can be dated back to the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSRAP) led by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) and the research on interlanguage speech acts that followed (for a comprehensive review, see Kasper & Rose, 2002). Findings from second language acquisition (SLA) research, including a range of languages and second language learner backgrounds, suggest discrepancies between native and non-native language use in the areas of speech acts (e.g. requests and apologies), discourse organization, formal and intimate forms of address, turn-taking, and conversational implicature. In other words, non-native sociolinguistic competence, defined by Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell (1995) as “the speaker’s knowledge of how to express messages appropriately within the overall social and cultural context of communication, in accordance with pragmatic factors related to variation in language use” (p. 23), seems to vary from native-like sociolinguistic competence in significant ways. It has been postulated that pragmatic mistakes are actually judged more harshly than mistakes in syntax, pronunciation, or lexis (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Hendricks, 2010). In fact, pragmatic errors such as a choice of an imperative construction to perform a request addressed to a person of a higher social status in English can be interpreted as rude, inappropriate behavior rather than as a result of developing (or fossilized) sociolinguistic competence.

## **Options in pragmatics instruction**

Findings from research suggest a need for pragmatic instruction and implications for language classrooms have been stressed in recent publications. Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2002, pp. 38-39) state the following goals for language teachers:

- 1) Raise language learners’ pragmatic awareness
- 2) Provide language learners with a choice of target language (TL) pragmatic devices and practices
- 3) Expand learners’ perception of the TL community

They also state two criteria for successful pedagogical practices (p. 39):

- 1) Use of authentic language materials as examples or models
- 2) Input provided before learners are asked to analyze samples of language and produce output

A plethora of pragmatics focused awareness-raising activities including both deductive and inductive approaches have been described in recent literature. Among other tasks, Ishihara (2010) lists the following: comparing learners’ L1 and L2 behaviors; sharing personal stories about situations when a pragmatic error caused a misunderstanding; participating in role plays; keeping a reflective journal; and interviewing native speakers about appropriate L2 behavior. Several of the activities can be used together in a single lesson plan to raise students’ awareness about L2 pragmatic norms and create opportunities for practice. Usó-Juan and

Martínez-Flor (2008) suggest that pragmatics instruction could include three stages: 1) learners' exploration; 2) learners' production; 3) feedback from peers and from the teacher. Butler (2012) discusses a workshop she used to raise students' awareness on writing appropriate email requests. The workshop consisted of the following steps: 1) data collection by the teacher; 2) presentation; 3) production; 4) contrastive analysis; 5) real-life application. The workshop started with a lecture on constructing directives in English, a presentation of two simple rules to follow when selecting a type of request to be used in a given situation, and a small group discussion of three different email scenarios and possible email messages. Next, the teacher presented and contrasted native and non-native speaker responses collected before the workshop. The workshop culminated in a presentation of examples of netiquette rules found on various websites. Butler concluded that she noticed some improvement in her students' emails following the workshop.

Besides extensive justification for instruction of pragmatics, diversified suggestions for tasks that promote the development of sociolinguistic competence and proposals for appropriate sequencing of activities, there have also been attempts to situate pragmatics within existing instructional frameworks. Ishihara (2010) suggests that integration into the general curriculum and the potential for coordination of topics with other courses are two important criteria for pragmatics focused lesson planning (p. 190). Félix-Brasdefer and Cohen (2012) propose an integration of pragmatics with grammar instruction. They argue that when presented jointly with pragmatic functions, grammatical structures become a "communicative resource," which allows learners to "not only increase their grammatical competence, but [...] also improve their functional

knowledge of how to negotiate communicative actions" (p. 664).

A framework that combines grammar and pragmatics instruction has also been proposed by Rose (2012). She presents two examples: "Using the imperative to make requests" and "Using the conditional to make requests and suggestions," and explains that rather than adding pragmatics focused units, instructors can include a pragmatics component in the existing grammar lessons. Rose argues that by adding focus on pragmatics to grammar units, teachers can highlight the use of certain grammatical forms to attain specific communicative goals without the pressure to add lessons on pragmatics when either limited instructional time or strict institutional curriculum guidelines may be an obstacle.

### **Pragmatics and content-based instruction: A perfect match**

There is no doubt that the time has come to integrate instruction on pragmatics' aspects of language into foreign and second language classrooms, and the number of publications describing various ways to do so suggests that the change is already under way. However, whereas the mainstream approach seems to be adding "spots on pragmatics" without making explicit links to other topics in syllabi, or simply integrating pragmatics instruction into grammar lessons in decontextualized learning situations, I am convinced that pragmatics has been taught for a long time within communicative language teaching frameworks such as Content Based Instruction (CBI) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), if only implicitly. As such, it seems that pragmatics instruction can be integrated not only within individual lessons, but also in course curricula.

The main premise of both CBI and CLIL is that language is taught through meaningful, engaging content. The extent to which this is actually done ranges along a continuum from content-driven programs in which instruction is guided by content objectives and the role of language learning is to support mastery of the content to language-driven programs in which the focus is on language learning with content in a secondary role (Met, 1999). However, a common characteristic of most CBI and CILI settings is that students encounter authentic language materials and engage in frequent interaction and collaborative work. Such a classroom is a perfect setting for pragmatics focused instruction, and it conforms to both criteria for successful instruction of pragmatics stated by Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003)

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stated above. In CBI and CILI classes, students can participate in discussions and debates and therefore engage in turn-taking, and express agreement and disagreement. They collaborate on projects in groups, which may require them to negotiate plans, discuss role assignments and outcomes, give commands and make requests. They may also be asked to do a formal presentation, a task in which they have to address and interact with an audience. Thus, the opportunities for integrating focus on pragmatics are endless. For example, a debate can be preceded by an awareness raising activity on turn-taking and rebuttal, the teacher can do a short presentation on expressing disagreement before a group project, or the students can keep a journal where they record the swear words they encounter as they discuss the theme “youth gangs.”

Clearly, explicit pragmatics instruction and pragmatics awareness raising activities can very easily be embedded within these frameworks. In Eskey’s words, “Content and

function flow rather smoothly together, being complementary aspects of language as a system for communication” (1992, 1997, p.139). Content based language classes, therefore, seem to be a perfect match for activities that focus on pragmatics. Below, I present an example of integrating pragmatics instruction into a college level Second Language Acquisition and Teaching Methods class taught using the CBI principles.

The students in the class are enrolled in a pre-service EFL teacher training program in Norway. Their level of English ranges from advanced low to advanced high according to ACTFL proficiency guidelines (2012).

The course spans two semesters, but only examples of topics and activities implemented during the fall semester are discussed here. The course plan integrates awareness raising activities suggested in the literature to date and it takes into account the proposals to present grammar as a “communicative resource” (Félix-Brasdefer & Cohen, 2012; Rose, 2012).

The following topics are covered in the first semester of the course: second language acquisition theories and second language teaching methods; first versus second language acquisition; bilingualism; individual learner differences; selection, evaluation and design of materials and activities; communicative language teaching; Content Based Instruction; thematic instruction; Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2008); and literacy issues in foreign language instruction. Each individual lesson is guided by a set of objectives that specify the expected student outcomes. These objectives, in turn, lead to a selection of appropriate activities, and once the instructor determines the main language forms and

functions needed to attain the tasks, a pragmatics component may be integrated into the lesson, based on the students' needs. Table 1 illustrates examples of objectives, activities, and pragmatics components used in the course.

It is assumed that pragmatics awareness raising workshop precedes the main activity because the language skills it builds and supports are needed for successful completion of the activity. Some of the pragmatics tasks have been created for this particular class; however, the majority have been adapted from existing resources available in recent publications such the workshop de-

scribed by Butler (2012), excerpts from "A Communicative Grammar of English" by Leech and Svartvik, and websites (e.g. Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA), <http://www.carla.umn.edu/index.html>). It is not imperative for every lesson to contain a pragmatics component. Rather, focus on pragmatics is dictated by the communicative needs students are faced with as they participate in the classroom discourse.

The following two examples illustrate how pragmatics awareness raising is integrated into other class activities. At the beginning of the semester, one of the objectives in

Objectives	Activities	Pragmatics component
Describe the main characteristics and list advantages and disadvantages of the following language teaching methods: the grammar translation method, the direct method, the audiolingual method, sugestopedia, TPR, TPRS	Instant expert activity: "Advantages and disadvantages of various learning teaching methods"	Turn taking, backchanneling, providing explanations
Debate issues related to how children learn foreign languages in "My Two Cents" activity	Debate: My Two Cents "How do children learn languages?"	Expressing agreement and disagreement, reinforcement
Ask questions about 1 <sup>st</sup> Language Assignment	Q/A about 1 <sup>st</sup> Language Assignment in class Individual emails from students after class	Composing an email with questions about an assignment to the professor; oral vs. written discourse (questions in class vs. questions in an email); requests
Evaluate a children's book in terms of its usefulness for YLL instruction  Design a lesson plan for young language learners focused on a children's book and present it to class.	With a partner, design a 45 minute lesson focused on the book "The Big Pumpkin." Your lesson should follow the Into-Through-Beyond model. Present your lesson plan to class. Receive and provide each other with feedback.	Giving and receiving compliments and criticism.

*Table 1: Excerpts from CBI lesson plans: objectives, activities, and pragmatics components.*

a lesson on second language teaching methods states:

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to describe the main characteristics and list advantages and disadvantages of the following language teaching methods: the grammar translation method, the direct method, the audiolingual method, Suggestopedia, TPR, TPRS.

To meet this objective, an instant expert activity in which each student is responsible for teaching the others about the advantages and disadvantages of one of the methods is used. In order to successfully participate in the activity, however, students

need certain language forms and functions, and it is at this point that the instructor added a pragmatics component

to the course. Because an instant expert activity requires a lot of interaction and working with a group to achieve a common goal (in this case, obtaining descriptions of each of the methods), language skills such as turn taking, backchanneling and providing explanations are considered useful. Thus, the activity itself is preceded by a workshop in which students receive an overview of native-speaker norms, reflect on their own language behavior, and compare it to that of native speaker examples.

For this particular lesson, I adapted the “What’s new?” technique discussed by Washburn and Christianson (1995). First, students listen to a short lecture on conversational strategies based on examples adapted from Leech and Svartvik (2002) including explanations and examples of the following: turn-taking; using backchanneling to show agreement; asking for and giving clarification; follow-up questions and comments. Next, students are paired up and asked to

script a 2-3 minute conversation on the topic “What’s new?” They are reminded to use at least four conversational strategies. They then go to a computer lab and record their conversations without looking at the script. The conversations are then played and discussed on the class forum. As students are given directions for the next task, the instant expert activity, they are reminded to use conversational strategies they have just practiced.

Another opportunity for a pragmatics “moment” arises during a class devoted to lesson planning for young language learners. Here students evaluate a picture

book and use it in a lesson plan they create and present to class. Because one of the course goals is for these future teachers to

develop a sense of community and to appreciate other teachers as available role models and resources, each presentation is followed by a feedback session in which questions are raised and the lesson is critiqued. An element of sociopragmatic competence that fits well with this activity is the ability to give and receive compliments and criticism. CARLA offers rich resources for teaching giving and receiving compliments in American English, and the lesson plan available on the Center’s website has been adapted for the needs of my students. A week before class, students are asked to keep a log of compliments they give and receive outside of school (both in English and in their native language). When they come to class, the workshop begins with a general discussion revolving around questions such as:

- What is a compliment?
- What do people say to give a compliment in English and in your first language?

***Focus on pragmatics is dictated by the communicative needs students are faced with.***

- When and to whom do Americans give compliments?

Next, examples obtained from the CARLA website, including compliment formulas (such as “NP is/look (really) ADJ,” e.g. “Your hair looks great!”) are distributed and the students are asked to compare the responses from their logs to the provided models. As a final task, they are given scenarios in which they give and accept or reject compliments, asked to prepare short conversations in pairs and present them to class.

Several other opportunities to integrate pragmatics instruction that have not been discussed here have been identified in the course. Because content and communication are the main focus of the class and guide the selection of activities, students are motivated to raise their pragmatic awareness. Sociolinguistic competence becomes a tool used to attain communicative goals in real time, right in the discourse community of the classroom.

## Conclusion

Research suggesting that explicit instruction can increase language learners’ pragmatic ability has led to various proposals on how such instruction could be integrated in foreign and second language classrooms (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Butler, 2012; Rose, 2010; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2008). Pragmatics focused activities such as comparative analysis of native and non-learner examples, speech act logs and reflective journals, role plays, interviews with native speakers and instructor-centered lectures are becoming increasingly common in language classrooms. It seems that content-based classes where students participate in a rich, content-driven classroom discourse, create natural opportunities to integrate pragmatics instruction and increase students’ sociolinguistic

competence.

The approach proposed here has not been empirically tested to compare it to other approaches to teaching pragmatics, and future research is needed to examine its effectiveness. However, students responded positively to the activities and commented that when explicit focus on pragmatics preceded tasks in which they had to engage in communication with classmates or the instructor, they were more aware of their language choices and felt more confident about their interactions. They also seemed to be more positive about this pragmatics driven approach to integrating language into a content based class in comparison with students in my other courses where the language support is given using a more traditional approach to teaching grammar (e.g. tenses, modals, passive voice). Overall, I hope that the ideas presented here will lead to more frequent integration of explicit focus on pragmatics in content-based language classes, and help us integrate these highly prolific areas of language teaching to a higher degree.

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