

NOTES ON THE SECOND LANGUAGE PRAGMATIC INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

This article will first define “pragmatics” and review research literature on the role of instruction in second language (L2) pragmatics. After that, it will discuss the effectiveness of different teaching approaches to L2 pragmatic instruction and the key variables that influence the instructional outcomes. Based on the review and discussion, this article will suggest directions for future research on L2 pragmatic instruction.

Keywords: pragmatics, L2 pragmatic instruction, L2 language teaching

I. *Pragmatics*

Developing the most cited definition of pragmatics, David Crystal (1997) defines pragmatics 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” (p. 301). Accordingly, pragmatics primarily concerns with communicative actions in its sociocultural actions (Kasper, 1997). Kasper and Rose (2002) adopt this definition and further delineate *use*, *interaction*, and *effects on other participants* as the main areas of investigation in L2 pragmatics.

In fact, Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983) have proposed two intersecting domains in pragmatics: pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. While pragmalinguistics refers to the linguistic side of pragmatics and addresses the resources that are used for conveying particular illocutions, sociopragmatics describes the interface between a language in use and a social organization. This division of pragmatics is particularly relevant in the field of language teaching because it highlights the need to consider both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic components in fostering the learners’ pragmatic ability. In other words, when dealing with pragmatics, a particular speech act’s forms cannot be isolated from the contextual factors that shape them. As Kasper and Roever (2005) explain, “becoming pragmatically competent can be understood as the process of establishing sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic competence and increasing ability to understand and produce sociopragmatic meanings with pragmalinguistic conventions” (p. 318).

Bachman (1990) was the first to explicitly identify pragmatics as one of the two main components of communicative competence in the target language. According to his model, pragmatic competence involves the knowledge of communicative actions and the ability to choose appropriate sociolinguistic conventions. Bachman’s model shows that pragmatic

competence is parallel to grammatical and textual ones, and they are all equally critical to the learners' achievement of communicative competence in the target language. From this point of view, his construct of communicative competence bears direct relevance to the role of pragmatics in language teaching.

II. *The Role of Instruction in L2 Pragmatics*

Schmidt (1993) has argued that simple exposure to the target language input is not sufficient for pragmatic development because some pragmatic functions and relevant contextual factors are not salient enough to be noticed by learners. His argument makes a strong case for the necessity of pedagogical intervention on L2 pragmatics. By citing research from language socialization (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986), Kasper and Schmidt (1996) assert that even in the first language acquisition, parents actively provide negative feedback in order to instruct pragmatic rules to children, thus justifying a clear advantage for instruction in L2 pragmatic development. In line with this position, Bardovi-Harlig (2001) contends that without direct pragmatic instruction, L2 learners' pragmatic production differs significantly from that of native speakers in several areas and remains distinctly non-target-like as a result.

With a consensus on the necessity for pragmatic instruction, researchers rely on two types of study to investigate instructional approaches to pragmatics: observational and interventional. The former examines the opportunities for and processes of pragmatic learning in classroom interactions, whereas the latter deals with learning outcomes and the effectiveness of different teaching approaches (Kasper, 2001). This distinction also shows their different theoretical and analytical underpinnings.

1. **Observational Studies**

Observational studies are mainly framed in two socially grounded perspectives: sociocultural theory and language socialization theory. Although these two approaches have different disciplinary origins, they both view learning as a socially constituted process and language development and social interaction as inherently linked. Given their focus on interactional processes, observational studies are based on extensive observations, which generate rich naturalistic data for understanding pragmatic learning in different classroom activities as well as developmental trajectory of L2 pragmatics.

Researchers applying sociocultural theory to pragmatic development are examining pragmatic learning through collaboration between L2 learners and teachers or native speakers of the target language (e.g., Alcón, 2002; Belz & Kinginger, 2002; Hall, 2005; Kinginger, 2000; Ohta, 1995). For instance, Ohta (1995) compares analysis of learner language in two different classroom activities: teacher-fronted exchanges and pair interactions in a Japanese-as-a-foreign-language classroom. The comparison reveals that learners have more opportunities to negotiate and use Japanese for a variety of purposes in pair work, which boosts their linguistic complexity, increases the salience of pragmatic features to each other, and consequently enhances their pragmatic performance. The richness of learner language generated in peer activities demonstrates joint activity as a beneficial exercise for potential L2 pragmatic development. In another insightful observation, Ohta observes that assistance in learning does

not necessarily have to come from the more capable peers in the L2 learning context. She provides empirical evidence that both the stronger and the weaker learner can benefit from the joint activity and advance beyond their current language abilities.

Same with sociocultural theory, language socialization also emphasizes the role of interaction and collaborative assistance in language development. Ochs (1996) defines language socialization as “the process whereby children and other novices are socialized through language, part of such socialization being a socialization to use language meaningfully, appropriately, and effectively” (p. 408). Therefore, L2 language socialization research has documented the process of how learners develop interactional competence by using recurrent communicative practices (e.g., the IRF routine in Ohta, 1999, 2001).¹ For instance, Kanagy (1999) describes how children in a Japanese immersion school learned to engage more competently in daily interactional routines. Through the collaborative assistance and corrective feedback from both the peers and teacher, the children gain more control of linguistic resources, which enable them to participate more independently and effectively in the classroom morning routines. Likewise, Ohta (1999) tracks the pragmatic development of one Japanese language learner over a year with a focus on how the IRF routine socializes the learner with expressions of alignment in Japanese. The findings demonstrate that through the repeated observations of a teacher’s assessment turns in the IRF routine, the target learner can anticipate how the sequence will likely progress and unfold, which helps her perform assessments and alignments more actively in peer activities.

Irrespective of the different theoretical orientations in observational studies, one recurrent result is that pragmatic learning occurs from assisted performance and through active collaboration with other learners. Therefore, peer activity is viewed as an effective instructional approach to engage learners in a wide range of communicative acts, increase opportunities of applying pragmatic principles, and, consequently, facilitate their L2 pragmatic development (Kasper, 2001).

2. Interventional Studies

In contrast to observational studies, interventional studies have been firmly anchored in cognitive psychological theories, especially the noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 1993, 1995, 2001), the output hypothesis (Swain, 1996), and the interaction hypothesis (Long, 1996). According to Schmidt’s noticing hypothesis, noticing is the necessary condition to turn input into intake and thus plays a critical role in second language acquisition (SLA). The hypothesis posits that in order for learning to take place, learners have to first notice relevant L2 features in input. According to Schmidt (2000), “in order to acquire pragmatics, one must attend to both the linguistic form of utterances and the relevant social and contextual features with which they are associated” (p. 30). Notably, the advent of the noticing hypothesis has greatly advanced research on the effectiveness of instructional intervention in the framework of implicit and explicit learning (Lyster, 1994). According to Swain’s output hypothesis, opportunities to produce the target language are necessary for language acquisition because during language

¹ The IRF routine contains an initiation turn, a response turn, and a feedback turn. In this three-turn sequence, while the teacher generally initiates the first and third turn of the routine, the students’ contributions are limited to the response turn.

production, learners will more likely notice how a language is used and what is needed to communicate in it. Finally, according to Long's interaction hypothesis, interactionally adjusted input can drive learning because the adjustment makes the input more meaningful and comprehensible to the interlocutor. In other words, this interactional adjustment is individualized and tailor-made, thus more likely to enhance the target feature's salience to the interlocutor.

Interventional studies on L2 pragmatics draw on these three SLA hypotheses to address three critical questions: "whether pragmatics is teachable, whether instruction in pragmatics produces results that outpace exposure alone, and whether different instructional approaches yield different outcomes" (Rose, 2005, p. 386). In terms of teachability, research on pragmatic features proves that the target features are indeed teachable (e.g., Liddicoat & Crozet, 2001; LoCastro, 1997; Olshtain & Cohen, 1990). With respect to the issue of instruction versus exposure, it directly tests Schmidt's noticing hypothesis—whether instruction that allocates the learners' attention to the learning target is more effective than mere exposure to the target language. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford's (1993) study on advising sessions and Bouton's (1994) on implicature lend empirical support to the claim that mere exposure to a target language does not lead to complete development of pragmatic ability (Kasper, 1997). In addition, numerous studies have provided ample evidence that instructed learners outperform uninstructed ones (e.g., Lyster, 1994; Wishnoff, 2000; Yoshimi, 2001), indicating that the pedagogical intervention does facilitate pragmatic learning (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Rose, 2005). In sum, these studies on pragmatic awareness and language learning address how instructional techniques can draw the learners' attention to input and facilitate L2 pragmatic learning. Regardless of the instruction's significant effects in pragmatics, the results of different teaching arrangements present relatively mixed results and are inconclusive.

III. *Effectiveness of Teaching Approaches*

Instructed pragmatics studies attempt to manipulate learning conditions, constructed as explicit or implicit, to evaluate teaching approaches. While the explicit intervention features explicit rule explanation and the provision of metapragmatic information, the implicit intervention uses consciousness-raising activities, "largely characterised by learners' induction or self-discovery of target features from given input" (Jeon & Kaya, 2006, p. 170). Notably, the actual treatment in intervention studies falls on an explicit-implicit continuum, rather than the seemingly binary explicit and implicit formulations. Overall, planned and explicit instruction yields larger effects than implicit instruction, and this result highlights the critical role of metapragmatic information in enhancing the salience of the target feature (Alcón, 2005; House, 1996; Martínez-Flor & Fukuya, 2005; Rose & Ng, 2001; Takahashi, 2001; Yoshimi, 2001). However, despite the positive findings for explicit instruction, some of the explicit-versus-implicit studies have documented negative or ambiguous outcomes. For instance, the durability of the explicit intervention's effectiveness is questioned in Liddicoat and Crozet (2001) and Koike and Pearson (2005) because the positive effects are not retained in delayed posttests. In addition, Jeon and Kaya's (2006) meta-analysis of 13 quantitative studies reports larger effects of explicit intervention than those of implicit intervention. However, the researchers caution that the operationalization and conceptualization of implicit and explicit instruction have too much

variation involved to demonstrate a definite and distinct advantage for explicit intervention. In a similar observation, Takahashi (2010) emphasizes the variation in study designs and thus calls for reconsidering the nature of explicitness when interpreting the research findings. She also notes that some forms of implicit intervention, targeting pragmalinguistic features, are as effective as the explicit one (e.g., Koike & Pearson, 2005; Martínez-Flor & Fukuya, 2005; Takimoto, 2007). Without a closer look at the study designs, it is premature to claim the superiority of explicit intervention in any L2 pragmatic features.

Despite the mixed results of different instructional approaches, Takahashi (2010) makes three fitting and insightful statements in her review on interventional studies: “(1) large effects of explicit intervention are not ensured in every aspect of pragmatic learning, (2) socio-pragmatic knowledge is less likely to be acquired through implicit intervention, and (3) some forms of implicit intervention are as effective as explicit intervention” (p. 129).

IV. *Key Variables of L2 Pragmatic Instruction*

1. **The Nature of Learning Targets**

Learning targets are recognized as a determinant factor in L2 pragmatic instruction's effect. Kasper (2001) discusses the contrasting instructional effects in two studies with similar treatment lengths (20 minutes for Kubota, 1995, and 25 minutes for Tateyama et al., 1997) and identifies instructional features as the main variable in the outcome difference. The implicature in Kubota (1995) is obviously more cognitively demanding than the pragmatic routines in Tateyama et al. (1997) and thus more difficult to master. In short, learnability is not equal for all pragmatic features. Cohen and Ishihara (2005) investigate their web-based materials' effect for Japanese speech acts through explicit intervention. The results show that the learning effects of request are larger than other speech acts, such as refusals and apologies, thereby bolstering the argument that not all speech acts could be equally learned. Likewise, Liddicoat and Crozet (2001) find that, in the delayed posttest conducted one year later, the target interactional practice's content apparently has been maintained, but the features of the linguistic form have dissipated. The researchers then conclude that some aspects of discourse are more easily learned, more readily integrated into an online interaction, and, consequently, more amenable to instruction. Yoshimi (2001) also reports parallel findings. Additionally, according to Kasper and Rose (2002), learning targets that directly relate to the learners' everyday life can further promote learner engagement and result in larger instructional effects. Also, sociopragmatic rules, another area of difficulty, prove more resistant to implicit instruction and more amenable to explicit instruction. For instance, Rose and Ng (2001) indicate that metapragmatic discussion is more beneficial to the learners' sociopragmatic knowledge of compliment than implicit instruction, and this finding underscores the necessity of explicit rule explanation for sociopragmatic development.

2. **Treatment Length and Outcome Measure**

Jeon and Kaya's (2006) meta-analysis directly addresses the treatment length and outcome measure. The researchers point out that even though the treatments of more than five hours are

reported to result in seemingly larger gains, the difference is not statistically significant enough to posit any definite causal relationship between the treatment length and instructional effects. Likewise, the link between the type of outcome measure and instructional effects is not affirmative. Although studies that employ a combination of natural and elicited language data generate larger effects than those that employ elicited data exclusively, the difference is, again, not statistically trustworthy. In sum, the link between these two variables and pedagogical intervention is not fully ascertained.

3. Individual Differences: Proficiency and Motivation

Wildner-Basset's (1994) work and Tateyama's studies (Tateyama, 2001; Tateyama et al., 1997) demonstrate that pragmatic routines, which are less cognitively demanding and complex, are teachable to beginner-level L2 learners. Therefore, unanalyzed chunks and form-driven routines act as more accessible learning targets for less proficient learners, whereas more proficient learners can engage in function-driven targets, such as speech acts (Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Takahashi, 2010). With the majority of interventional studies involving learners with intermediate to advanced proficiencies, researchers seem to hold an implicit assumption that a linguistic threshold "may be considered as a prerequisite for intervention on certain pragmatic features to have a positive effect" (Takahashi, 2010, p. 136). Isolating proficiency as the variable, Codina-Espurz (2008) finds that lower proficiency learners may not have the necessary linguistic knowledge to benefit from the explicit instruction on request mitigators. Yet she notes that the effects of proficiency on pragmatic instruction merit further research to verify its influence on the outcome.

Learner motivation acts as another factor that influences pragmatic instructional effects (Takahashi, 2001; 2005, 2010). Even though Tajeddin and Moghadam (2012) find that high pragmatic motivation does not necessarily predict high pragmatic ability, no empirical study has directly examined the effects of learner motivation on pedagogical intervention. How learner motivation is related to instructional effects is yet to be explored.

4. Learning Context

The learning context's relevance to the pedagogical intervention's effects was also noted (Kasper, 2001; Yoshimi, 2001). A second language (SL) learning context no doubt affords the learners more opportunities to encounter and use the target features than a foreign language (FL) context and thereby potentially maximize learning outcomes. Previous studies (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Barron, 2002; Schauer, 2006) demonstrate the superiority of an SL context over an FL context in pragmatic development. Along this line, Kasper (2001) argues that for SL teaching, "rather short periods of teaching pragmatics can be effective when learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom are combined" (p. 56). Given the scarce practice opportunities outside the classroom in FL settings, it is assumed that, all else being equal, instructional effects in an SL context would surpass those in an FL context. Even though the learning context's role has been frequently investigated in light of the learner's pragmatic competence, particularly in the study-abroad research, the learning context as a single independent variable has not been incorporated into interventional studies. Therefore, no clear evidence of its effect is available.

V. *Directions for Future Research*

Taken together, these variables' effects on pragmatic instruction remain suggestive and not conclusive. Not a single variable alone seems sufficient to account for the instructional effects on L2 pragmatics. Also, the variation involved in individual research design leaves the possibility of teasing out determinant factors in a muddle. To fully understand the link between the variables and learning outcomes, doing so demands more future instructional pragmatic studies that are "equipped with a sophisticated design, sound processing of data, and thorough reports on procedures and results" (Jeon & Kaya, 2006, p. 202).

In addition, research on instructed pragmatics ultimately aims to generate findings that are generalizable across different learning contexts. Yet the variables underlying instructional treatments and the variation involved in the definition and operationalization of learning conditions belie the assumed generalizability to learning contexts beyond the study at hand. As a consequence, this contradiction constitutes an inherent threat to whether pedagogical implications based on the research outcomes can hold any value for language teachers when little is known about the classroom processes and the implementation of instructional treatments. This lack of information on the delivery of instruction is problematic with interventional research, inevitably calling into question the assumption that learning outcomes are the direct results of the instruction. An important task for future interventional research on instructed pragmatics is therefore to document classroom practices and instructional treatments in detail and analyze them systematically. This task could clearly benefit from the rich classroom descriptions in observational research.

Drawing on the research results from interventional and observational research, Kasper (2001) concludes that "sustained focused input, both pragmatic and metapragmatic, collaborative practice activities, and metapragmatic reflection appear to provide learners with the input and practice they need for developing most aspects of their pragmatic abilities" (p. 57). These pedagogical implications supply a compelling rationale to combine interventional with observational research to fully understand the conditions needed for pragmatic learning in language classrooms (Alcón, 2008). Ohta (2005) already proposes combining these two types of research. In the study, Ohta evaluates three interventional studies on interlanguage pragmatics and argues that their instructional treatments could be reinterpreted in light of sociocultural theory, specifically the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).² Ohta's evaluation amply demonstrates the value of applying the ZPD construct for "a richer understanding of the depth and variety of developmental processes that learners experience" (p. 515). Thus, conducting interventional studies from a socially grounded perspective is promising because it will give classroom researchers and language professionals a better understanding of learner engagement in classroom activities as well as the link between instructional treatments and learning outcomes in L2 pragmatics.

² Vygotsky (1978) defines the Zone of Proximal Development as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86).

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