Adapting teaching materials for L2 pragmatics instruction

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Introduction

In the past three decades, English as an additional language (EAL) researchers and practitioners have become increasingly concerned with the instruction of second language (L2)[1] pragmatics. Broadly defined as the ability to communicate and interpret meaning in social situations (Taguchi, 2015), pragmatics is an essential component of many models of communicative competence (Timpe-Laughlin et al., 2015). Typically, descriptions of L2 pragmatic competence comprise two parts. The first part, known as sociopragmatics, involves knowledge of how contextual factors (e.g. the relationship between speakers) inform language use. The second component, referred to as pragmalinguistic competence, entails knowledge of how particular linguistic forms (e.g. modals to make polite requests) are used to convey pragmatic competence (Leech, 1983). During the 1980s and 1990s, research in L2 pragmatics investigated to what extent it could be learned in the classroom, and surveys of these studies have shown that L2 pragmatics can ultimately be improved through instruction (Rose, 2005; Taguchi, 2015). In more recent years, researchers have explored factors which may impact the effectiveness of L2 instruction, ranging from individual learner and contextual factors to differing instructional approaches (see Plonsky & Zhuang, 2019 for a meta-analysis of L2 pragmatics instructional studies).

L2 pragmatics and teaching materials

While many of these factors may fall outside of the purview of teaching pragmatics, one relevant area of concern for EAL instructors involves teaching materials. In spite of the importance of incorporating authentic language into textbooks (Vellenga, 2004), studies have shown that textbooks often present pragmatic language and strategies that do not reflect real-world use (e.g. Diepenbroek & Derwing, 2013; Ross, 2018). Additional research has shown that the pragmatic structures presented in textbooks are

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[1]   While the acronym "L2" has traditionally referred to a "second language," my use of the term L2 refers to any additional language.

sometimes inconsistent with the target learners' language level (De Pablos-Ortega, 2011). Ultimately, these findings point to potential issues with commercially available teaching materials, where pragmatic forms are presented without context and conflicting information is given about which pragmatic forms are preferred in specific contexts. Nevertheless, commercially and freely available teaching materials are often a requirement or necessity for EAL instructors. Thus, the objective of this brief report is to provide a practical overview of how to adapt teaching materials for the purpose of L2 pragmatics instruction.

What needs to be taught?

First, it is important to choose which elements of pragmatics you wish to teach your EAL class. Some pragmatic elements may already be embedded in your language program's curriculum or teaching materials; however, these materials may need to be supplemented. In terms of what to teach, one of the most popular components of L2 pragmatics amongst both researchers and practitioners involves speech acts. Speech acts entail patternized and routinized language used to perform specific functions (Cohen, 2008). Practically speaking, these may include functional tasks such as requesting, refusing, complaining, complimenting, apologizing, and even using insults. For a comprehensive yet accessible overview of different speech acts and common strategies and phrases used by proficient English speakers, it may be useful to refer to the University of Minnesota's CARLA website (n.d.). By consulting additional resources such as the CARLA website, it is possible to review the information provided in your teaching materials about a specific speech act and add additional material, as necessary.

Additionally, when considering the needs of your students and which speech acts may be useful to teach, Fujimori and Houck (2004) provide three guiding questions:

1. How frequent and/or important is the speech act?

2. Do students avoid or misuse it?

3. Is their avoidance, or misuse, potentially confusing or offensive, to speakers of English?

Fujimori and Houck also note that certain speech acts such as apologies, refusals, requests, and compliments have been frequently identified as particularly challenging for EAL learners. In the end, it is important to assess the needs of your students to decide which speech acts should be taught and when.

Beyond speech acts, there are other elements of pragmatics that may be appropriate to teach your EAL students. For example, routine formulae, which refers to formulaic language used for social interaction purposes (see Bardovi-Harlig, 2012 for an overview), is often an essential component of L2 pragmatics. Examples of routine formulae may include phrases such as nice to meet you! or I'm sorry for your loss,

and these phrases are typically found within one or more speech acts (e.g. a greeting or condolences). Less researched and taught aspects of L2 pragmatics include gesture or non-verbal cues, tone, implied meaning, and interactional competence (Roever, 2021). The latter involves knowledge about and the ability to organize different speech acts in a conversation (e.g. a greeting, followed by a refusal and then an apology), managing conversation topics and knowing when to pause. While some of these aspects of L2 pragmatics—especially implied meaning and interactional competence—are more appropriate to teach high-intermediate or advanced-level EAL learners; they are just as important as speech acts and often are omitted from commercially available teaching materials.

Recommendations for adapting your teaching materials

Once you have decided what you would like to teach, there are many ways you can adapt your teaching materials to enhance the instruction of L2 pragmatics. To begin, it is important to analyze the pragmatic information available and identify any missing contextual information. This may include information about the relationship between the speakers (e.g. classmates, family, co-workers), how familiar they are with each other (e.g. acquaintances or old friends) and where they are (e.g. at work or at a party). All of this contextual information will inform you about which pragmalinguistic forms are most appropriate to use in a given situation. Depending on the level of the learner, it may be useful to vary this contextual information across different scenarios and discuss how language choices (e.g. formal vs. informal) may change.

To complement this contextual information, the use of authentic language samples and multimedia is highly recommended, when possible. To provide additional examples of common phrases or speech acts used in a particular situation, it is easy to gather a few authentic audio-recorded responses or written text samples from coworkers, friends, or family on instant messaging apps. In terms of multimedia, commercially available teaching materials often do not provide sufficient aural or visual information to accompany pragmatic information. This can easily be remediated with online resources to enhance the authenticity of the teaching materials. Tangibly speaking, these resources could include images of real people, or video clips showcasing different voices, accents, and non-verbal gestures to provide additional pragmatic information.

Conclusion

In summary, previous research has highlighted the need for L2 pragmatics to be better integrated into EAL curricula and teaching materials. Still, with a basic understanding of what L2 pragmatics involves, it is possible to adapt what resources are already available to you and meet the needs of your EAL students.

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