Adding a Cross-Cultural Pragmatics Component to EFL Courses

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Introduction

In recent years pragmatics studies have been appearing with increasing frequency in applied linguistics publications (Kasper & Rose, 1999). EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers who come across interesting pragmatics findings and might want to incorporate them into their courses face a number of challenging questions. How can I share pragmatics-related information with my students in a concrete and consistent way? How can I promote the development of pragmatic skills rather than just burden students with lists of pragmatics findings? What is the relationship between pragmatics and culture teaching in EFL?

Spurred by a belief that, despite being a messy concept at times, pragmatics deserves a prominent place in language classes, I have over the past few years attempted to answer these and related questions to my own satisfaction. This paper briefly discusses some of the major issues that are likely to confront any EFL teacher who struggles to come to terms with pragmatics and its role in language teaching.

Pragmatics and Cross-Cultural Pragmatics

Pragmatics is an amorphous term with a wide range of competing definitions. However, most of the definitions acknowledge that, unlike syntax or semantics, the study of pragmatics is not limited to linguistic forms and their sequencing when examining how meanings are derived. Not only what is said, but also who said it, to whom, where, when, why, and under what circumstances are all valid areas of inquiry. Thus, we can say that pragmatics is "the study of the systematic relation of a language to context" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 281), or perhaps "the study of how more gets communicated than what is said" (Yule, 1996, p. 3).

Cross-cultural pragmatics concerns itself with the broadest aspect of context: It looks at how cultural assumptions that most people take for granted help to shape the construction and perception of utterances. Pragmatics studies with a cross-cultural focus tend to be either descriptive (e.g., looking at how particular speech acts such as disagreements or compliments are formulated in a variety of cultures) or explanatory (e.g., ascribing certain aspects of a learner's pragmatic transfer in a target language to particular norms or values inherent in the first language culture). Potential pragmatic competency in a target language is situated somewhere in the murky area where knowledge of the target culture and acquisition of its linguistic forms intersect.

The Role of Pragmatics in Language Teaching

It comes as no surprise that many language programs have cultural components. On the other hand, it seems that very few language programs have

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components devoted specifically to pragmatics: Components that would explicitly and systematically help students make crucial connections between their language knowledge and the cultural information they are receiving. Perhaps this is due to the fact that few language teaching professionals have been formally trained to consider the role of pragmatics in language acquisition. As of 1995, 48 of the 171 MA-TESL programs represented in TESOL's *Directory of Professional Programs* offered courses in intercultural communication, but only 18 of the programs listed courses in pragmatics (Bouton, 1996). It may also be due to the perceived difficulty of teaching pragmatics, or to the hopeful assumption that pragmatic competence will eventually emerge in learners as long as enough linguistic forms and cultural information are taught. However, most people who spend significant amounts of time with second language learners would agree that interactions with even advanced learners often reveal pragmatic deficiencies despite impressive linguistic and cultural knowledge.

I believe language teachers are generally intrigued by the research findings of an increasing amount of cross-cultural pragmatics studies and they recognize the need to help students develop pragmatic competency, but sometimes shy away from addressing such issues in their classes due to the perceived complexities involved in conveying core pragmatic concepts. This is a legitimate concern, but not sufficient grounds for ignoring pragmatics in our language classes. The consequences of not helping students develop pragmatic competency are grave once they begin interacting with native speakers of the target language. Although native speakers are routinely able to attribute grammatical or phonological errors to a simple lack of linguistic knowledge, pragmatic errors are much more subtle and therefore tend to be attributed to the *personality* of the speaker rather than to insufficient language ability. Thus, well-intentioned speakers with pragmatic deficiencies run the risk of being characterized as rude, uncooperative, arrogant, or insincere. (Gass & Selinker, 1983). The more linguistically advanced a learner is, the more this unfortunate risk applies. Clearly, then, EFL teachers are doing a disservice to their students if they do not at least attempt to address pragmatic competency in language classes, regardless of how daunting the task may at first seem.

Having struggled with this issue for a number of years, I have gradually assembled a framework for talking about pragmatics with my students. Though far from perfect or even complete, it does give me an opportunity to begin to discuss with my students a major component of language learning that is too frequently kept in the EFL closet. The next section of this paper is organized according to the major stumbling blocks I faced while attempting to develop pragmatics activities that might actually help language learners rather than just confuse them. Each obstacle is written as a criticism to a pragmatics approach, and is followed by an explanation of how I have attempted to overcome it.

Pragmatics in EFL Classes: Obstacles and Answers
The concepts and terminology of pragmatics are too difficult for students to grasp.

This can be a surprisingly steep hurdle to overcome. Teachers have to either rely on the jargon of researchers, search exhaustively for suitable textbooks, or

develop frameworks of their own. In the past, while attempting on-the-spot pragmatic explanations in class, I often found myself wandering into a minefield of sophisticated terms that, far from being helpful, likely just confused and frustrated my students. Unless all students intend to enter linguistics graduate programs, terms such as *utterance, imposition, mitigator,* and *implicature* will probably be of little use to them beyond the course. One obvious option is to replace each term with a semantically simplified explanation. For example, a sentence such as *Utterances with high degrees of imposition usually contain several mitigators* might be reworded as *Phrases or sentences that are used for a goal that makes the listener spend a lot of time or effort usually have some words or phrases that cause the goal to feel soft and easy to accept.* However, the complex syntactic parsing required by this latter sentence renders it no less difficult for students to understand than the lexically challenging former one.

Despite the recent proliferation of pragmatic studies, the boom in pragmatics-based classroom materials that one would expect to accompany this trend is still in its infancy. Some recent textbooks show promise, but I imagine relatively few teachers who want to add a pragmatics component to their classes are willing to go as far as ordering a textbook and structuring a whole course around it.

Distressed by the abstruse terminology prevalent in pragmatics studies and underwhelmed by available textbooks, a colleague and I (Mach & Ridder, 2000) decided to build our own conceptual framework for pragmatics terms that could be easily grasped by students. Our goal was to design something that could be used extensively in our courses aimed at preparing students for study abroad, and also as a shorter module in our other English courses. We came up with a basic analogy that readily lends itself to visual demonstrations: Utterances are like pillows that people toss at each other; the size and shape of each pillow is determined by its pragmatic features. We then extended the analogy to cover enough concepts so that our students could undertake basic pragmatic analyses. As Table 1 illustrates, only concrete terms that are frequently used in non-academic contexts were chosen.

Table 1
Terminology for Key Pragmatic Concepts

Pillow framework terms (Used with students)	Corresponding terms typically found in professional literature (Not used with students)
Politeness pillow	Pragmatically appropriate utterance
Pillow-maker	Interactant during speaking turns
Goal	Conversational intent
Target	Interactant during listening turns
Impact	Degree of imposition
Feathers	Categories of pragmalinguistic features (e.g., mitigators, hedges, intensifiers) and secondary speech acts
Pillow size	Amount of pragmalinguistic features in an utterance
Pillow shape	possible implicatures and perceived appropriateness of an utterance
Culture clue	Explanation of a culture-based assumption

Once familiar with the terms in the left column above, students are able to take part in pragmatics-based activities by talking about pillow-makers who choose

feathers to determine the size and shape of their politeness pillows. As they consider how culture clues inform their understanding of targets, goals, and impacts in given situations, they are engaged in cognitively sophisticated pragmatic analyses whether they realize it or not.

Table 1 illustrates that the term *pragmatics* has been replaced with *politeness*. Though the term *politeness* in general society often implies prescriptive behavioral admonitions (e.g., cover your mouth when you yawn) that language teachers should certainly avoid, applied linguists tend to use the term in a descriptive sense for any strategy used to facilitate an interaction by minimizing the potential for misunderstanding and conflict inherent in all verbal exchanges while preserving harmony and cohesion (Lakoff, 1990). For instance, including an explanation of *why* you want to borrow a friend's car when requesting to borrow the car can be analyzed as either a pragmatic strategy or as an act of politeness. From a pragmatics point of view, the explanation would likely be understood as an attempt to justify the accompanying request. In politeness terms, it would be seen as an attempt to avoid the potential conflict that any such request entails. Whatever one chooses to call it, looking at how, when, and why explanations are sometimes attached to requests is a worthwhile classroom activity because the norms for doing so differ markedly across cultures. The advantage of calling it *politeness* is that most students already know this term and can readily offer examples of how politeness manifests itself in their own languages. Admittedly, collapsing pragmatics into politeness would be questionable at higher levels of analysis, but I have repeatedly found it to be a reliable conceptual shortcut for the immediate needs of my EFL students.

Related approaches have not always yielded impressive results.

I use the "pillows" framework outlined above as a means of introducing pragmatics activities that can be plugged into my theme-based and task-based courses whenever appropriate, so I would categorize it as a simple pedagogical tool rather than a broad approach. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to try to situate it in relation to approaches that are based on similar concepts. Perhaps the most common avenue for the introduction of pragmatics-based activities in classrooms has been through applications of speech act theory, most notably the notional-functional approach. A glance at a notional-functional syllabus will reveal content organized in units with titles such as *compliments, requests,* and *expressing disapproval.* Textbooks based on this approach often rely on form-function lists and pattern practice. Common criticisms included the charge that, like the structural approach, it is based on an analytic as opposed to synthetic view of language but is less generalizable than grammar (Krahnke, 1987). The situational approach, recognizable by unit headings such as *At the post office* or *Graduation day,* usually presents a more synthetic view of language but tends to rely on set dialogues rather than on development of the skills needed to consistently take contextual factors into account.

It seems to me that one seldom addressed weakness shared by the notional-functional approach, situational approach, and even the rather ill-defined communicative approach currently in vogue is a tendency to overemphasize speaker-based variables at the expense of listener-based ones. The framework presented in Table 1, with terms such as *politeness, target, impact,* and *culture clue,* allows for a stronger focus on how utterances affect listeners. Admittedly, the

particular situations my students analyze are not always generalizable, but I believe using a framework to consistently look at how meaning can be derived beyond word level promotes a basic pragmatic awareness that is transferable to any communicative situation.

Language should be taught without attendant cultural baggage.

A part of me is attracted to this criticism so I struggle with it repeatedly. Paulson's (1992) assertion that one need not be bicultural in order to be bilingual is representative of the stance that language and culture are separable entities. The last thing I want to do is impose another culture's ways of thinking and behaving on my students who perhaps envisioned nothing more than learning some new vocabulary and grammatical structures as they enrolled in my course. However, pragmatic competency can still be promoted if we give students chances to simply learn about cultural elements rather than pressure them to become bicultural. In this sense, the teacher's attitude towards target language cultural norms and pragmatic patterns is of critical importance: Awareness and understanding should be encouraged, but insistence on performance is not necessary or even desirable (Kachru, 1994).

Atkinson (1999) concludes that proficient use of a target language "cannot be developed without at the same time developing knowledge of the sociocultural contexts in which that language occurs and for action in which it exists" (p. 647). I agree that teaching language does to some extent entail teaching culture, but it seems to me that cultural components are sometimes added to language classes based on an unexamined assumption that any type of culture learning can positively impact language learning. In my own classes I try to limit cultural content to that which can be expressly linked to pragmatic features of language. For example, the often noted tendency of Americans to value reason and logic over fate and intuition (Stewart & Bennett, 1991) perhaps manifests itself not only in the relatively high number of lawyers in the United States but also in the observable pragmatic tendency in American English for explanations to be attached to requests, suggestions, and even often to apologies. The point is that awareness of cultural assumptions that give rise to pragmatic patterns can be used to help students avoid miscommunication and unwarranted perceptions of personality. The degree to which learners are attracted to or repulsed by any particular cultural value can make for interesting discussion, but from a language pedagogy point of view it is of secondary importance when compared to helping students see how it can influence actual language use. Any cultural information that does not have similarly traceable links to observable patterns of language use is perhaps superfluous material in a course that has objectives ostensibly limited to language learning.

Cultural generalizations are unreliable and should be avoided.

Even if cultural norms that supposedly influence pragmatic choices are identified, it can be argued that introducing such information to students entails too many problems. Most cultural generalizations are overly simplistic and rife with exceptions. In addition, students who do not have much experience with cultural studies might be prone to uncritically accept whatever the teacher says. For instance, in a study that pointed to the dangers of overgeneralizing cultural behavior, Beebe and Takahashi (1989) found that their Japanese subjects tended to be too direct in

English because their teachers overemphasized directness in English-speaking cultures.

Tying language to culture admittedly presents problems, but what is the alternative? If we attempt to cleanse our language courses of cultural information, learners will likely rely on popular cultural stereotypes or form their own stereotypes once they begin to use English in real intercultural situations. At that point, they may no longer have a teacher to guide them through the stereotypes, point out exceptions, and help them develop a sense of cultural relativism. Furthermore, as Atkinson (1999) points out, attempts to maintain an acultural attitude can be just as reductive as attempts to distinguish between cultures.

I feel cultural generalizations have a place in language classrooms as long as they are used with caution. A teacher would be wise to not only admit the possibility of exceptions from the outset, but also structure pragmatic activities so that students are occasionally prompted to identify exceptions. Just as grammatical rules are sometimes useful constructs to use in language classes despite their many exceptions, cultural patterns are a starting point upon which pragmatic hypotheses can be cautiously based. And just as learners tend to overapply newly learned grammatical rules before they can successfully cope with exceptions, simplistic cultural generalizations might be a necessary early step in the path to pragmatic competency.

Because English is an international language, it is inappropriate to associate it with any particular culture or pragmatic norms.

For better or worse, the rapid and unprecedented spread of English around the world has undeniably made it a global language (Crystal, 1997). No single country owns it or can control its development. Moreover, each variety of English has a unique set of pragmatic norms assumed by its users. Though less of an issue in ESL contexts, the question of whose cultural and pragmatic norms to teach can be problematic in EFL situations because of the likely diversity of language learning goals among the students. However, I tend to think that this supposed complication is sometimes overemphasized. Because pragmatic patterns are an essential yet subtle aspect of language use, awareness raising activities can be worthwhile regardless of the language or language variety analyzed. The easiest approach is to simply make use of whatever cultures are represented in the classroom. In my case, I am an American teaching Japanese students, so the cultural values that influence pragmatic choices in American English and Japanese constitute the bulk of my pragmatics-based activities. However, given English's international status, content from any culture would be appropriate (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). Thus, I am also comfortable using pragmatic findings and anecdotes from a variety of other cultures that I have come across through research and personal encounters. I cannot claim to be an expert on those cultures, nor does my native status necessarily make me an expert on American culture. However, I feel that teachers shouldn't shy away from addressing pragmatics due to a lack of expertise. Guiding students through the process of searching for implicatures (the meaningful and context-dependent nuances of an utterance) is more important than arriving at a supposedly expert conclusion. Therefore, at least when it comes to pragmatics, the traditional teacher

role of knowledge provider is best abandoned in favor of a role as facilitator and fellow learner.

Only target culture natives can successfully teach pragmatics.

This criticism can be countered with a number of points already made. First, the notion of target culture is often problematic for an international language such as English. Second, even when a particular target culture or cultures can be identified, pragmatics teaching need not be limited to the pragmatic patterns of that culture if general awareness raising is viewed as a legitimate objective. Third, if the teacher adopts a stance of fellow learner and hypothesis maker in pragmatic activities, the cultural expertise that natives supposedly offer is not necessary. In fact, a teacher with the same cultural background as his or her students probably best understands their pragmatic assumptions. If this understanding is coupled with at least some knowledge of other cultures, such a teacher might be in the best position to guide students through cross-cultural pragmatic activities.

Even in the case of a Japanese who teaches English to Japanese students and has few opportunities to learn about non-Japanese cultures, a focus on certain pragmatic features of Japanese might still be appropriate because it serves to raise awareness of the subtle and culturally bound assumptions we all make and which influence our perceptions of those with whom we interact. As Samovar and Porter (1999) point out, the first step in becoming a good intercultural communicator is to thoroughly reflect on yourself as a product of your own culture. Nevertheless, if at all possible, analysis of pragmatic patterns of a language other than the students' own is also desirable because it helps develop empathy. Without a sufficiently developed sense of empathy, English learners may lack the flexibility and relativism needed to successfully navigate intercultural encounters in English regardless of how advanced their knowledge of English structure may be (Okuzaki, 1999). With empathy, learners are more likely to search for meaning beyond the literal denotations of words. In other words, they are more likely to be pragmatically competent.

Conclusion

The primary goal behind adding a pragmatics component to EFL classes is to remind learners to not stop at the levels of vocabulary and grammar when searching for meaning. We all do this in our first languages but sometimes neglect to do so in a second language because our attention is occupied by more obvious semantic and syntactic obstacles. The "pillows" framework offered in Table 1 is an example of how pragmatics concepts can be made concrete and accessible for students. A door is thus opened for ushering in a variety of pragmatics-based activities, a description of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Whether acknowledged or not, language learners are already receiving pragmatics-based comments in many of their courses. Unfortunately, typical comments such as *that's awkward; something about that sentence you wrote doesn't feel right;* or *I understand what you want to say, but a native speaker wouldn't say it that way* tend to be overly vague and perhaps unhelpful. In fact, they may leave students with the frustrating impression that a secret code lies buried in the target language

and they do not have access to it. Pragmatic patterns and the cultural norms they arise from are not secrets, but they easily escape notice due to their subtlety. Despite the challenges it poses, I believe an attempt to explicitly and systematically raise pragmatic awareness among language learners can be a worthwhile pursuit.

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