Approaching an Intersection: Pragmatic Competence and Being a University Student
George de Man

Abstract: One of the more familiar challenges of teaching first-year university students is fostering their initiative to take part in class discussion. In the EFL classroom, discussion activities are rightly valued as opportunities for language practice. Less obvious, in contrast, may be the ways that the process of acculturation to college classroom norms intersects with second language difficulties, especially among first-generation college students who comprise a sizable demographic in the Hungarian university population. Pragmatics instruction, it will be argued, has a role to play in helping empower students to express their ideas and opinions in the company of their peers and instructors. However, supplying students with a lexical "toolkit" and peer-to-peer scenarios is only a first step in this direction. Indeed, it is precisely because the college experience is for many "first gens" a form of culture shock that the norm-disrupting potential of North American humor can be as important as modeling the myriad ways English speakers can verbally negotiate awkward or unfamiliar situations. Best practices for supporting first-year student engagement and success, as piloted at U.S.-based higher education institutions will also be explored.

Keywords: EFL; first-generation students; pragmatics; peer feedback; humor

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## Pragmatically Speaking

Pragmatics in the EFL/ESL classroom, broadly understood as the teaching of speech acts, is commonly presented as a tool for achieving communicative competence or producing illocutionary utterances comparable to native speaker norms across a broad spectrum of interpersonal contexts, from email requests to apologies (Limberg, 2015; Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Bardovi-Harlig, et al., 2015). This definition is by no means inaccurate. Taguchi and Sykes (2013) write that pragmatic competence is "critical" in a globalized world, yet even for advanced nonnative learners who have achieved high levels of proficiency in grammar, achieving pragmatic competence according to context can be elusive (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). At the same time, pragmatics has no less persuasively been described as a means by which "L2 learners construct and negotiate their identities" as part of their socialization into their learning community (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). As Wyner (2014) has suggested (citing Crystal [1985] and Kasper [1997]), pragmatic competence can be seen as "knowledge of how to use language to achieve goals in language interaction, or rather, competence of language interaction in a sociocultural context" (85). Given this diversity of emphases, it could even be argued that a "whose pragmatics?" approach should be part of any teaching strategy.

Indeed, how to "teach" pragmatics remains a subject of considerable discussion. Vellenga (2004) and Ishihara and Cohen (2010), among others, have suggested that ELT textbooks often fall short on metalinguistic explanation and adequate practice material. The promise of "internet-mediated communicative contexts" or synthetic immersive environments (i.e., virtual reality) has been extensively explored in Sykes et al. (2008) and Cohen and Sykes (2013). The rise of corpus linguistics has opened new possibilities in this as it has in many other areas, notably by making it possible to quantify formulaic sequences in naturally occurring academic language (Biber et al., 2004; Bardovi-Harlig, et al., 2015). According to Schmidt (1993), attention to form, meaning, and context on the part of the motivated learner, of course, will always be necessary. In general, pragmatics seems to lend itself to a deductive approach. Krulatz (2014) has argued that content-based instruction (CLIL) provides the "perfect match" for pragmatics learning because it offers myriad opportunities for such "pragmatic 'moments'" as collaboration, presentation, and discussion. Murray (2009), in turn, has proposed Grice's Cooperative Principle—essentially a set of universal conversational maxims—as "a useful guide to etiquette and the socially appropriate use of language" (296).

In my nearly fifteen years as an L2 professional, pragmatics instruction has seldom appeared to be an obvious priority for my students, or for that matter for myself, perhaps due to the fact that for most of us, illocutionary knowledge is by definition incidental: we often literally do not know what we don't know about "how to do things with words in an L2" (to modify J.L. Austin's celebrated phrase) until the opportunity arises for (or is imposed upon) the learner, if only because the appropriateness of a speech act is context-driven. Context is not merely descriptive (e.g., voicing a complaint, offering consolation, refusing an invitation), but determinative, obliging a speaker to choose among individual words and word groupings, all the while attending to the intensity of effect on the receiver—not to mention cultural appropriateness. Far from being a neglected area of

L2 research, pragmatics may nonetheless come as an afterthought to classroom practicioners precisely *because* we assume that everything our students need to know about it they will best learn outside the classroom.

The University Experience

Yet the reality is that for many first-year students the college classroom presents formidable communicative obstacles of a pragmatic nature, much as the postsecondary institutional experience as a whole does, confronting first-generation students in particular with a "cultural mismatch" between their social background and the culture of the university (Stephens, et al., 2012). Such real-life scenarios as rejecting the advice of academic advisors or requesting a letter of recommendation from a professor, are unlikely to feature in even the most advanced second language classroom, and yet it is possible to raise students' awareness of how to navigate them in an L2 context (see Akikawa & Ishihara, 2010 and Félix-Brasdefer & Bardovi-Harlig, 2010, respectively). While I feel that developing a comprehensive pragmatics curriculum for university students enrolled in Europeam English-medium programs is not practical, I think it is important for postsecondary L2 professionals to recognize where the challenges of language learning intersect with those of the first-year or first-generation college students in general. With the exception of Bettina Murray's (2020) recent study of language anxiety among first-year college ELLs, literature in this area would at first appear to be in short supply. Yet Ross's *Breakthrough Strategies* (2017) offers a rich survey of approaches to helping students from working-class backgrounds transcend the formidable intercultural barriers that can prevent them from engaging with, and thriving within, the college milieu. Although her setting is a small regional institution in the U.S., the difficulties described by the students should be familiar to any educator who has worked with college-level ELLs in other countries, from learning how to ask questions to making presentations. Indeed, the less we think of pragmatics in terms of target forms and instead in terms of students' personal, professional, and academic needs (to paraphrase Wyner [2014]), the more resource material we are likely to find.

The pragmatics of asking questions, for example—of using interrogative structures with the dual illocutionary purpose of validating one's right to participate in a discussion while simultaneously prompting reflection in others—is one of the curious blind spots in L2 pragmatics literature. (Typically, questions are relegated to adjacent pairs or simple requests.) But in her discussion of encouraging student questions, Ross (2017) recommends discharging tension through humor and developing a reward system for students who ask relevant questions that the teacher is unable to answer. She also observes that the reluctance to ask may stem from culturally rooted student perceptions of professors as individuals whose higher social status warrants veneration through silence, and proposes a candid conversation with students who have been discouraged by adults in the past from asking questions to avoid appearing "stupid" (56). The relevance of Ross's advice to this discussion is the idea that while social context may determine pragmatic choice, social context itself is malleable and negotiable, even (or especially) in the college classroom.

Human Resources

My ever-evolving approach to pragmatics instruction diverges from those highlighted in this review only in the particular balance between deductive and inductive learning I try to strike with my students. While Ross's (2017) inclusion of humor with her first-generation undergraduates in the form of jokes for their own sake is well-intentioned, I make a point of selecting material that is

"teachable" in the sense that students are exposed to native speaker responses which are appropriate for the context yet tension-defusing precisely because the "appropriate" response is not immediately obvious. Selected episodes from the early reality television show *Candid Camera*, widely available on YouTube, serve this purpose, both in their glimpse of everyday English-language pragmatics and their brevity. The premise of *Candid Camera* is that people find themselves having to verbally negotiate surprising yet carefully orchestrated interpersonal situations (all of which are captured on a hidden video camera). In one application, students could merely be asked to take note of the variety of discourse strategies they observe (e.g., direct, indirect, use of softeners, intensifiers, and so on) and discuss their findings in pairs. Beyond merely serving as ten-minute icebreakers at the start of a communication skills class, this exercise may even evoke for some the intercultural uncertainty that accompanies the learning of pragmatic competence (*Candid Camera* was filmed in the United States) while underscoring the degree to which pragmatics should be understood less as the application of prescriptive formulas—although these are important—and more as a form of creative problem-solving. For an episode such as "Nothing but duck," students could be presented with a hypothetical scenario on a Power Point slide:

> You and a friend are on a trip to California. A tourist website highly recomends a restaurant which specializes in Asian cuisine, so you decide to go. Upon being seated, you discover that every item on the menu in some way features duck. Your waiter is approaching the table. What do you say?

and paired up to discuss a response, before being shown the video. Alternatively, small groups could be assigned hypotheticals from other episodes prior to viewing (e.g., "Substitute teacher conference," "Lazy husband," "Change your name") and expand them into role-plays.

Bardovi-Harlig and her colleagues (2015) have provided a helpful introduction to the ways that such free online spoken corpora as the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) can inform the teaching of pragmatics for academic purposes. Approximately 200 hours of university speech are included in the MICASE, with university-situated speech events (e.g., advising sessions, seminars, student presentations) searchable by phrase, generating a concordance with links to transcripts which can be shared with students. Excerpts from these transcripts (see Appendix A) can be used for focused noticing purposes as in Bardovi-Harlig et al. (2015), or to create authentic discourse-completion tasks. For advanced level students interested in conducting their own observations of American academic English "in the wild," as it were, the MICASE is a valuable tool, but as is true of this and other corpora, I have found that it is best explored in with the assistance of a teacher and a specific research focus; moreover, several transcripts are quite long, and the sound quality of the related audio files is uneven. Once edited for length and clarity, however, the scavenger hunt possibilities are many, from the simple (e.g., locating particular phrases) to the less so (e.g., disambiguating the uses of "what you're saying" across context).

Developmental "Stages"

Along with the intangible benefit of fostering student engagement and collaboration, presentations offer an opportunity for the practicing of peer feedback in the form of encouragement, disagreement, requests for clarification, and suggestions. Nguyen and Basturkmen's (2010) paper on strategies for teaching constructive feedback highlights the use of mitigation devices such as softeners and degrees of directness: students are presented with sample speech and tasked with identifying the former, evaluating the latter, and suggesting alternative responses if needed. For my own classroom uses, I have developed a one-page worksheet for crafting feedback according to the

nature of the assessment as well as suggested softeners and intensifiers (Appendix B). My choice of stems is partly intuitive and partly based on expressions found in the MICASE (e.g., "I wonder if you'd," "I'm not sure that," "when you say"), but an exhaustive collection of candidate expressions can be found in Bardovi-Harlig, et al., 2015). Note that semantically evasive words and expressions like "interesing" and "Great job!" are included but deliberately crossed out to discourage usage.

Asking a question, I am persuaded, is both a critical academic skill and one of the more intimidating pragmatic acts; as Dickman (2009), writing in a non-ELL context on the importance of what he terms question-eliciting-questions, has said, "interrogatives…are reducible to imperatives" (4), so it makes sense that students intuitively shy from this form of speech act, especially with professors. Dickman rightly notes that students who ask their own questions "gain responsibility for their own learning" (12), but I would argue that students should see their questions as equally contributing to the learning of their peers. I am thinking, of course, of the pragmatics of constructive feedback in the form of effective questions and commentary, often encountered (or at least encouraged) in the context of oral presentations. As Xu and Carless (2017) state in their study of first-year undergraduates in an EFL program in China, "generating quality feedback on oral presentations is cognitively demanding" (1088). With such cognitive demands in mind, I have developed a second feedback worksheet for students, with interrogative phrasal stems arranged according to function (Appendix C), to be used in conjunction with the feedback assessment template described above—when students are truly engaged, there is a fine line between making commentary and wanting to know more. Building on Murray's (2009) suggestion, I identified question types according to the Cooperative Principle—an unconventional application, perhaps, but helpful for students because Grice's maxims would require the interlocutor to identify his or her purpose in formulating a particular question (i.e., to seek further evidence, concision, relevance, or clarity from the presenter) and in the process, to reframe the asking of questions as a way "to get another person to share our questions" rather than as something reserved for those in authority (Dickman, 2009).

Concluding Reflections

Inevitably, the more that TESOL professionals continue to explore ways of defining, modeling, and eliciting pragmatic competence, the need for a *pragmatics for specific purposes* becomes apparent; given the sheer scope of the subject, in fact, there is likely no other kind. As I hope I have shown, beginning university students could benefit from a raised awareness of how things are "done" in English through the study of North American corpora and the observation of how native speakers negotiate unexpected scenarios, and how to "do" things in the college classroom in what is, for many, the uniquely intimidating context of peer feedback and class discussion, though these represent only a few of the speech acts students will need to take the initiative to perform as full participants in the university community. Especially for those students whose English language learning prior to college did not include oral expression, much less group discussion, such practice contributes to the engagement which Astin (1984) Tinto (1993) and others have long recognized as vital to college student success and retention. "Classrooms represent smaller communities of learning in which both faculty and students participate," writes Tinto (1993). "Involvement in those communities can serve as a vehicle for further involvement in the life of the institution."

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Appendix A: MICASE Transcript Excerpt with Target Phrases

S6: and the other one we had that, I just noticed is not there is uh using three different levels of proficiency, because um in the, article that we read um it says that even very proficient second language learners still, have problems with pragmatic concepts so we would like to, see how they are really different

S11: any questions?

S5: *did you take* [sex] *into account* with your, results?...i i i've no basis for this but i think that women probably draw things out more...you know...like my father says okay, you're okay? bye click

S8: *i was just thinking another thing you might look at is*, if there--if they choose short answers all across the board it might have something to do with personality...because me when i was answering like, number three and four, i'm the kind of person that's just like mm, i'm done, you know?

Appendix B: Constructive Feedback Worksheet

| Presenter name: | | Your name: |
|---|---|---|
| Presentation title/topic: | | |
| Date: | | |
| Notes: | | |
| Softeners | | Intensifiers |
| *Could, would, maybe, if, possibly, arguably, seem, pretty, somewhat, kind of*<br>Ex.: "The connection between X & Y seems logical" | | *Very, really, too, clearly, so, should/ought*<br>Ex., "The definition you gave of X was too technical." |
| Descriptives (Positive) | | Descriptives (Negative) |
| ~~Interesting~~, Informative, effective, compelling, persuasive | | Unclear, confusing, debatable, "hard to follow" |
| Agree/Approve | | Clarification |
| ~~Good/great job!~~<br>I really liked what you said about...<br>You make a really good point about... | | Can you explain...<br>I'm not sure I understand what you said about...<br>What did you mean when you said...<br>When you say/said ___, do you mean that... |
| Agree/Disagree | | Suggestions |
| I agree that ___, but...<br>I'm not sure I agree that ___...<br>I don't quite see the [connection between]... | | I wonder if you could/should...<br>I would like to know more about...<br>You might consider ___*ing* [e.g., looking at, investigating]... |

## Appendix C: Constructive Feedback Worksheet (Questions)

| Presentation title/topic: | Your name/date: |
|---|---|
| **Notes:** | |

| Questions of Fact | Questions of Detail |
|---|---|
| How can we be sure that…?<br>How do we know that…?<br>What evidence is there that…? | Would/Can you go back over…?<br>Would/can you please summarize again the…? |

| Questions of Relevance | Questions of Clarity |
|---|---|
| Would/Can you explain the connection between X & Y?<br>Would/Can you show how X relates to Y?<br>How would you say this relates to…? | Would/Could you mind restating [the idea/concept of]…?<br>Can you explain again what you meant by…? |