

Developing Pragmatic Competence in the EFL Classroom

RESearch into pragmatic competence has repeatedly proven that even proficient speakers of English often lack necessary pragmatic competence; that is, they are not aware of the social, cultural, and discourse conventions that have to be followed in various situations (Bardovi-Harlig 1999). Research has also been done on the disparity between grammatical and pragmatic competence. However, relatively less attention has been paid to how classroom-based instruction can contribute to the pragmatic development of foreign language learners. This article presents the activities of a four-week program aimed at developing students' pragmatic competence by focusing on two speech acts, openings and closings.

The role of pragmatic competence

Communicative language pedagogy and research into communicative competence have shown that language learning exceeds the limits of memorizing vocabulary items and grammar rules (Canale 1983). Pragmatic competence, although sometimes in disguise, has been a part of the models describing communicative competence. We have defined pragmatic competence as the knowledge of social, cultural, and discourse conventions that have to be followed in various situations (Edwards and Csizér 2001).

Pragmatic competence is not a piece of knowledge additional to the learners' existing grammatical knowledge, but is an organic part of the learners' communicative competence (Kasper 1997). Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, and Reynolds (1996) highlight the importance of pragmatic competence and point out the consequences of lacking this competence:

Speakers who do not use pragmatically appropriate language run the risk of appearing uncooperative at the least, or, more seriously, rude or insulting. This is particularly true of advanced learners whose high linguistic proficiency leads other speakers to expect concomitantly high pragmatic competence (324).

The teachability of pragmatic competence

Can pragmatic competence be taught? This question has inspired a number of research projects exploring the role of instruction in learners' pragmatic development. Kasper (1997) argues that while *competence* cannot be taught, students should be provided with opportunities to develop their pragmatic competence:

Competence is a type of knowledge that learners possess, develop, acquire, use or lose. The challenge for foreign or second language teaching is whether we can arrange learning opportunities in such a way that they benefit the development of pragmatic competence in L2 (1).

A number of studies have explored how English language textbooks present speech acts (see Bardovi-Harlig et al (1996) on closings; Boxer and Pickering (1995) on compliments; and Edwards and Csizér (2001) on

openings and closings). These studies are essential from an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) perspective because in EFL instruction natural input is much scarcer than it is in an English as a Second Language (ESL) setting. Therefore the role of textbooks in raising students' pragmatic awareness is more important. However, all the above-mentioned articles concluded that textbooks usually fail to provide the necessary and appropriate input in speech acts, and the material they do present often differs from real life speech.

It is difficult to give clear suggestions for improving pragmatic input in textbooks, particularly because textbooks are usually targeted to an international audience. Boxer and Pickering (1995) underline the importance of building teaching materials on spontaneous speech and not relying on native speaker intuition, which may be misleading at times. Enriching classroom input with real-world materials, such as recordings of native speaker conversations, radio programs, and even television soap operas, can be beneficial. To provide sufficient pragmatic input for the students, it is also important to supplement textbooks with additional books that focus on pragmatics.

Openings and closings

Because we chose openings and closings as the focus of our pragmatic program, we here survey the literature to provide some useful concepts and definitions. None of the studies mentioned in Kasper's (1997) comprehensive account deal with the explicit or implicit teaching of openings and closings. There are, however, studies on openings, mainly comparing native and non-native speakers. Omar (1992) examined these two groups on the basis of how they open conversations in Kiswahili. Closings have been examined in naturally occurring conversations (Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1992). With respect to both openings and closings, the studies concluded that non-native speakers often had problems mastering these elaborate speech acts.

An examination of English openings and closings shows that they are elaborate. Openings usually start with an *adjacency pair* (Schegloff and Sacks 1973), such as *Hello!–Hi!* This pairing is often followed by a *post-opening*, such as *How are you?* Post-openings are the elements that come between the greeting and the

main body of the conversation (Edwards and Csizér 2001).

In their examination of closings, Bardovi-Harlig et al (1996) noted that English closings often end with an adjacency pair called *terminal pair/exchange* (e.g., *Bye–Good bye*). The researchers point out, however, that before this terminal pair, speakers often attempt to shut down the topic, that is, complete the closing, by using *pre-closing* elements such as: *Well, it was nice talking to you* or *I'll talk to you later*. Because not all languages have such elaborate openings and closings as English, learners often have difficulty acquiring the pragmatic rules and functions that differ from their native language.

Instruction in pragmatics

As mentioned earlier, the textbook studies concluded that there is often insufficient input to enable EFL learners to develop necessary pragmatic competence. To address this problem, we designed a pragmatic program involving four activities to provide students with explicit teaching on two speech acts, openings and closings. Each activity lasts about 35 to 45 minutes and contains follow-up discussions during which students and teachers discuss the new structures and phrases as well as any problems that arose while completing the activities. Below we describe these activities for the benefit of EFL and ESL teachers who may wish to implement them in their classrooms.

ACTIVITY 1: HOW WOULD IT SOUND ABROAD?

This activity (based on Edwards 2003) includes a short conversation that students have to translate from their first language (Hungarian, in our case) to English. The conversation does not contain difficult grammar or vocabulary, but it is completely Hungarian in its nature; that is, it is made up of pragmatic elements that can not be directly translated into English, such as the formal and informal forms and some greetings. The situation and the literally translated dialog is presented below:

An elderly woman and a man in his twenties meet in the street. They have known each other for some years, but very superficially. Translate the following simple dialog and think about how it would be different in England or the United States.

- A: Good morning, Auntie Elizabeth!
B: Good morning, John!
A: How are you?
B: Well, I'm not too well. I've been struggling with backaches recently... and you know my salary is quite low. We can hardly make ends meet at the end of the month.
A: Oh, well... I think this is all the government's fault. The such and such party would do a much better job.
B: Hmm, maybe. Well, here is my bus. I have to go. Bye.
A: Hello.

Short and simple as this dialog may seem to be, it provides a very good opportunity for a thorough discussion about the pragmatic differences between the two languages. During discussion the following issues can be raised:

- In English, *How are you?* is usually considered a greeting, not a real question. However, in Hungarian, the phrase *Hogy vagy?* or *Hogy van?* (depending upon whether the speaker uses the informal or formal form) may communicate genuine interest in the other speaker's well-being. As a result, the EFL student might be surprised or—worse yet—insulted if not given adequate time to describe, say, his or her stomach problems.
- English phrases, such as greetings, are used in other languages, but often take on a different meaning. In Hungarian, for instance, *hello*, in addition to being a greeting, is a leave-taking. Therefore, while it is perfectly acceptable in Hungarian to convey *goodbye* by saying *hello*, a native English speaker hearing *hello* is likely to be astonished by such a leave-taking.
- Adult English speakers do not ordinarily address someone as *Auntie* or *Uncle* unless there is a genuine familial relationship of that sort. In Hungarian, however, a similar form exists (*néni* for females and *bácsi* for males), and children and young people may use it to address older adults outside of their family. Because English does not distinguish between formal and informal forms, politeness or informality has to be expressed by other means.

- In English one might attempt to end a conversation by using pre-closing elements (see Activity 2 below); however, in other languages, speakers may end a conversation more abruptly.

When the activity described above was piloted with a group of teacher trainees, students pointed out that, although there were no grammatical problems with the translated dialog, it still “wasn’t English.” This observation points to the fact that language proficiency cannot be complete without knowledge of the appropriate pragmatic rules of the target language.

ACTIVITY 2: WE CAN’T SAY GOODBYE!

This activity consists of three parts. In the first part, the teacher facilitates a discussion in which students brainstorm some phrases for closing a conversation, such as:

I’ve got to go now.

I’d better let you go.

It’s been (very) nice talking to you.

I (really) must go / must be going / must be off now. Take care.

The teacher writes the phrases on the board.

In the next part, the students work in pairs on an elaborate and jumbled dialog ending (taken from Bardovi-Harlig et al. 1996). Their task is to put the lines of the dialog in order. Below we provide the jumbled items so that the readers can reassemble the dialog. (The dialog, with the lines in the correct order, appears in the appendix.)

B: Fine. I’ll talk to you then.

A: I’d love to continue this conversation, but I really need to go now. I have to get back to the office.

A: Good-bye.

B: Well, let’s get together soon.

A: Sorry I have to rush off like this.

B: Friday sounds good. Where shall we meet?

A: (looks at watch) You know, I really must be going now or I’ll be very late. Can you give me a call tomorrow and we’ll decide?

A: How about Friday?

B: That’s OK. I understand.

B: So long.

After the second phase of the activity, the teacher brings up the following questions for discussion.

- Who’s trying to end the conversation? Who wants to continue to chat?
- How does one speaker try to signal that he/she wants to end the conversation?
- How do the speakers confirm their arrangement?

The follow-up activity is to write a soap opera dialog in which two people in love cannot say goodbye to each other and are trying to maintain the conversation for as long as possible (based on Dörnyei and Thurrell 1992, 39).

ACTIVITY 3: WHAT ARE THEY SAYING?

This activity includes a warm-up exercise during which the teacher attaches pieces of paper to students’ backs with a different “role” on each of them, such as *Mr. Thomas, your new boss; your uncle; your favorite TV personality; Mrs. Lovas, your elementary school teacher*. The students’ task is to find out their roles by listening to other people greeting them.

In the second, and main, part of the activity, students write conversations that correspond to different pictures (taken from Jones 1981, 5–18). They have to decide whether the situation is a formal or an informal encounter and choose phrases accordingly.

In the third part of the activity, the discussion contains the following questions:

- What differences are there between the formal and informal greeting forms?

Informal: *What’s up? / What’s new? / How’s it going? / How’re you doing?*

Nothing new. / I’m doing well.

Formal: *Hello Mr.(s) / sir...! Good morning /afternoon/ etc.*

Let me introduce myself. / May I speak to you, please?

- At what point (during the warm-up activity) did you find out who you were?
- How can you express politeness in English despite the lack of formal and informal forms?

ACTIVITY 4: COMPLETE THE DIALOG

The goal of this activity is to complete a simple and somewhat artificial-sounding dialog and make it more life-like. A very short conversation is given to the students, and they are asked to expand the dialog by adding extra phrases and elements as well as a beginning

and end to the conversation. The original dialog is the following:

- Pat:** Where do you live, Kim?
Kim: I live next to the library on Main Street.
Pat: How long have you lived there?
Kim: For two years.
Pat: Where did you live before that?
Kim: I lived in an apartment close to the university.

The teacher uses the blackboard or the overhead projector to write down expressions and phrases that the students can use as ideas for expanding the dialog. Students are also encouraged to come up with their own ideas based on their background knowledge and the previous three activities of the pragmatic program. Following are examples:

Opening:

(greeting) *Good morning / Hello / Hi, John!*
(important after greeting/post-opening)
How are you?—Fine, thanks. / I am doing well.
/ Getting on, thanks. / Nice day, isn't it? /
Excuse me, can I ask...can you tell me...?

The body of the dialog:

Do you come here often?
Oh, by the way, that reminds me...
Have you heard the latest about...?
The traffic in this city is simply incredible /
Can you believe it?
Oh, really? It's unbelievable! / I can't believe
my ears!

Closing:

I've got to go now / I've got to be going now. /
Take care.
I'd better let you go / I'd better not take up
any more of your time.
I hope you don't mind, but ...
We'll have to get together (again) some time.
So, I'll see you soon / next week.
Bye! / See you (later)! / Good-bye!

In the discussion, the teacher asks the following questions.

- How did Pat and Kim greet each other/close the conversation?
- What phrases did you use to make the original dialog more interesting or life-like?

The aim of these activities is to give students firsthand experience in issues of prag-

matic competence and to deepen their understanding by letting them discover the rules themselves. Working with Hungarian EFL learners, we designed the pragmatic program for their needs. However, all the activities can be tailored to other first languages, and teachers can prepare the dialogs and the discussion questions accordingly. Another consideration is that these activities were designed for monolingual classes. With multilingual classes, students with the same first language can work together. At the next stage, an interesting discussion can occur among students of different first languages, comparing their observations.

The empirical study

To obtain information on the potential usefulness of these activities in the EFL classroom, we decided to carry out an experiment involving 92 high school students in Hungary. The purpose was to investigate whether a four-week program would have any effect on how students performed the speech acts of opening and closing conversations. The program comprised the four activities described above, facilitated by the students' regular English teachers, who had been provided with information on the purpose of the study and a detailed description of the activities. We visited the classes during the program and observed how the activities were carried out.

As our goal was to ascertain how the explicit teaching of some aspects of pragmatic competence affected students' performance, students were divided into a treatment and a control group (66 and 26 students, respectively), and their performance was measured by a pre- and a post-test requiring the students to perform a dialog with their peers. The format of the pre- and post-tests was a role play in which the students, working in pairs, had to solve a problem or reach an agreement without seeing their peer's role card. The pre- and post-test role plays were tape-recorded and transcribed. As part of our analysis, we measured the presence of openings and closings and their appropriateness (for example, choosing the formal or informal greeting forms required by the situation and using hello only as a greeting). We also analyzed the elaborateness of the two speech acts, as determined by the presence of greetings, post-openings, shutting down the topic, pre-closings, and termi-

nal pair/exchange. Our results show that after completing the activities described above, students in the treatment group used more elaborate opening and closing elements, which indicates the effectiveness of the program.

Conclusion

Pragmatic competence can be developed in the classroom through a range of situations and activities. We believe that pragmatic rules that are different from or nonexistent in the students' first language need to be given emphasis. Comparative studies and needs analyses can be carried out to address the most challenging pragmatic issues facing particular groups of students. Finally, however promising the results of our four-week program were, a more thorough and long-term program would be needed to produce even more beneficial effects. This is a task we language teachers can fulfill in our classrooms.

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MELINDA EDWARDS is a learning center coordinator in Indiana and a Ph.D. candidate at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest.

KATA CSIZÉR is completing her Ph.D. dissertation on L2 motivation research at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest.

APPENDIX | CORRECT FORM OF THE DIALOG ENDING FOR ACTIVITY 2

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- A: I'd love to continue this conversation, but I really need to go now. I have to get back to the office.
- B: Well, let's get together soon.
- A: How about Friday?
- B: Friday sounds good. Where shall we meet?
- A: *(looks at watch)* You know, I really must be going now or I'll be very late. Can you give me a call tomorrow and we'll decide?
- B: Fine. I'll talk to you then.
- A: Sorry I have to rush off like this.
- B: That's OK. I understand.
- A: Good-bye.
- B: So long.