

The Effect of Explicit Metapragmatic Instruction on the Speech Act Awareness of Advanced EFL Students

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Abstract

This study deals with the application of the pragmatics research to EFL teaching. The study explored the effect of explicit metapragmatic instruction on the speech act comprehension of advanced EFL students. The speech acts of requesting, apologizing, and complaining were selected as the focus of teaching. Teacher-fronted discussions, cooperative grouping, role plays, and other pragmatically oriented tasks were used to promote the learning of the intended speech acts. A pretest-posttest control group design was used. The subjects included Iranian undergraduate students in their last year of study in the field of teaching English as a foreign language. A group of American students were used to provide the baseline for the study. A multiple choice pragmatic comprehension test was developed in several stages and used both as a pretest and posttest to measure the effect of instruction on the pragmatic comprehension of the students. The results of the data analysis revealed that students' speech act comprehension improved significantly and that pragmatic competence is not impervious to instruction even in EFL settings.

Introduction

Holmes and Brown (1987) offer the example of a male student who attempted to compliment his teacher by saying, "You are wearing a very lovely dress. It fits you" (p. 525). The teacher found this compliment from a young male student inappropriate. However, research on language use shows that American speakers frequently compliment on looks and clothes (Manes and Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson, 1989). Textbooks also teach these types of compliments as one of the common ones used by American speakers of English. How could this student

have known then, that this compliment may give unintended messages rather than showing his interest in using the language? How can a learner figure out the norms of appropriateness for various speech acts and different interlocutors in the target culture? [-1-]

Sharifian (2004, p. 119) offers the following example from an Iranian student:

An Iranian student at Shiraz University receives from her American lecturer the recommendation letter that she has asked him to write for her and then turns to him and says, "I'm ashamed." Bewildered by the student's response, the lecturer asks, "What have you done?!!!"

This is an example of intercultural miscommunication from the use of a wrong illocutionary force indicating device for thanking. The expression used would be more appropriate when an offence is committed, rather than to show gratitude and appreciation.

These are examples of pragmatic failure that L2 learners encounter when they are involved in the act of communication. Trying to get the meaning across, they may simply translate speech acts from their mother tongues to the second language. Pragmatic failure, unlike grammatical errors, often passes unchecked by the teacher or, worse, it is attributed to some other cause, such as rudeness. Examples like the above instigate us to assume that we ought to teach the rules of appropriate language use.

Several studies (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Boxer & Pickering, 1995; Bouton, 1996; Kasper 1997) have shown that learners of high grammatical proficiency will not necessarily possess comparable pragmatic competence. Even grammatically advanced learners may use language inappropriately and show differences from target-language pragmatic norms.

Bouton (1996) notes that the development of communicative competence should be the goal of language teaching. He proposes three major directions that researchers can take in order to further contribute to the theory of communicative competence: (1) the refinement of the study of speech acts as they occur in different cultures, (2) an investigation to determine the extent to which explicit instruction can increase the rate at which nonnative speakers develop different factors of their pragmatic competence, and (3) the contribution pragmatics can make to the presentation of different functions of a language in textbooks designed for second language learners. This study makes contribution in the second area, namely, effect of instruction on pragmatic competence.

The aim of the present research is to show the possibility of teaching pragmatics in an EFL setting with the assumption that this problem can be overcome by giving the student the tools to make the processes of pragmatic decision-making explicit. It is claimed that helping students to make the process of pragmatic decision making explicit will help in successful communication and appropriate use of the second language and will hopefully promote cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. [-2-]

Background of the Study

This study is theoretically grounded in the area of Communicative competence, Pragmatics, Speech Act Theory, Second Language Acquisition Theory, and Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP).

Interlanguage Pragmatics is defined as the study of 'learners' use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in a second language (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Kasper, 1999; Rose, 2000).

Although pragmatic performance studies make up a relatively large amount of literature on interlanguage pragmatic, the literature on "interlanguage pragmatic development" lags far behind (Kasper, 1999, Kasper & Rose, 1999). As Schmidt (1993) puts it, "there has been little discussion of how pragmatic abilities are acquired in a second language" (p. 21).

Rose (2000) mentions that there have been some cross-sectional studies (e.g., Siegal, 1994, 1996; Ellis, 1992; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993) and a few longitudinal studies done recently which have investigated the effects of instruction on pragmatic development over a period of time (Bouton, 1994; Billmeyer, 1990, House 1996). Schmidt (1993) for example has explored the role of "conscious awareness" in the acquisition of pragmatic competence. He concludes that the necessary condition for pragmatic learning to happen is attention to pragmatic information to be acquired.

Kasper (1999) distinguishes between "observational" and "interventionist" studies of pragmatic ability within L2 classrooms. Observational

studies focus primarily in classroom processes, either without a view to learning outcomes or with learning outcomes being analyzed as emerging in and through classroom interaction. Often but not always, the observed classrooms are authentic in the sense of not being specifically arranged for research purposes. Interventionist studies, on the other hand, examine the effect of a particular instructional treatment on students' acquisition of the targeted pragmatic feature.

According to Kasper (2001), opportunities for learning L2 pragmatics in foreign language setting, compared to second language environment, are much more restricted. Interventional studies (House, 1996; Wildner-Bassett, 1984, 1986) support that by metapragmatic instruction and discussion, students can make significant gains in pragmatic ability in FL classrooms. However more research needs to be done to shed light on the kind of instructional measures that are most effective for EFL contexts and other related issues to developmental pragmatics in impoverished L2 contexts.

Relying upon Long's (1996) and some other second language acquisition theorists, Kasper (1999) holds that in purely meaning-oriented L2 use, learners may not detect relevant input features, and that for achieving learners' noticing, input should be made salient through "input enhancement." It is believed that input enhancement will raise the learners' consciousness about the target feature. Input enhancement is defined by Fukyua and Clark (1999) as an implicit instructional technique that provides no metapragmatic information. However, Takahashi (2001) proposes a much broader view of input enhancement. She distinguishes three different degrees and types of input enhancement: explicit teaching, featuring metapragmatic explanation about form-function relationships of the target structures; form-comparison, in which students compare their own speech acts realizations with those of native speakers; and form-search, in which students identify the target strategies in provided scenarios. [-3-]

Most of the interventionist developmental studies with a focus on "input enhancement" have a component proposing that the target pragmatic feature be described, explained, or discussed and made as the object of metapragmatic treatment. According to Kasper, metapragmatic instruction might be combined with metapragmatic discussion with the active participation of students in various forms of teacher-fronted-format, peer work, small groups, role-plays, semi-structured interviews, introspective feedback, and metapragmatic assessment tasks. Some studies (e.g., House, 1996; Tateyama et al., 1997; Pearson, 1998) have shed light on the issue of metapragmatic instruction and compared it with other forms of instruction, like "implicit teaching," and "practice conditions."

Kasper and Rose (2001) argue that effects of instruction on interlanguage pragmatic development, especially in the L2 classroom, have been explored "far less." They go on and add that classroom research has only played a minor role in interlanguage pragmatics thus far. That is, different aspects of learning or teaching in L2 classroom is still awaiting for further research. Finally, Kasper (1999) calls for classroom research on pragmatics that combines process and produce perspectives.

In response to such calls by Kasper (1999) and Kasper and Rose (2001) this study explores the effect of explicit metapragmatic instruction on the speech act comprehension of advanced Iranian EFL students.

Methodology

Participants

All 66 Iranian EFL participants in this study were undergraduate students, participating as members of intact classes. The two groups (one control and one treatment) were fourth year students in the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Isfahan University in Iran majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. They thus share basic demographic characteristics, such as L1, and field of study. Both male and female students were among the participants and the age range was between 23 and 25. The EFL learners had studied English between 6 to 9 years, mainly through highly controlled formal education in Iran. Baseline data for English were collected from thirty American English speakers who were undergraduate students or had recently graduated from university. Snow ball sampling was used to collect data from American English speaking students. Most of the students were residing in California at the time of data collection. The sample included both males and females and their age range was between 21 and 30. All participants' approval was provided through informed consent forms.

Materials

The study included a set of programmed instructional materials explaining the realisation and interpretation patterns, rules, strategies, and tokens of the three speech acts under study. Following Bardovi-Harlig's (1996) tentative 'speech acts framework', the materials compiled started with presenting descriptions of the notions of speech acts, levels of directness, and types and factors of variability. Speech acts were explained in a "speech act set" format (Olshtain & Cohen, 1991). Each speech act set encompassed the major sociopragmatic and

pragmalinguistic patterns and strategies of interpreting and realizing one particular speech act at the “explicit,” “conventional,” and “implicit” or “indirect” levels (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984), considering both “internal” and “external” modifications specified under the effects of various situational, social, or cultural factors of variability. [-4-]

Procedures

Phase I. Test Construction. In order to develop the pragmatic awareness test a discourse completion test (DCT) that measures pragmatic productive ability was first developed. The DCT was used to provide the native English baseline data from native speakers of English and also to use EFL learners’ responses to find suitable distractors for the multiple choice items. Twenty six situations which centered on a student’s family, social, and academic life were selected as the items of the production questionnaire. The situations were student-life oriented in order to reflect subjects’ real-life experiences and to ensure naturalness of data as much as possible. The situations represented variety of variables that reflect different social power and social distance of the interlocutors.

The multiple-choice comprehension test was constructed on the basis of Farhady’s (1980) functional language testing. The production test employed had an open-ended format and was made of 26 items each of which presented a situation where a certain kind of speech act is expected. The situations centered around 3 kinds of speech acts (requests, apologies, and complaints) which were the focus of this study.

The production test was administered to 25 EFL learners similar to the actual group of the students in the main phase of the study and 30 American undergraduate students. Therefore, building on the pilot-tested items of the “production test” employed in this study, a multiple choice comprehension pragmatic test was developed to measure the effectiveness of metapragmatic instruction on the pragmatic awareness of advanced EFL learners. Each item had four choices. Only one of the four choices for each test item was both sociopragmatically “appropriate” and pragmalinguistically “accurate” and thus considered as the correct choice. The other three choices were intended as “distractors” for the item.

The most frequent responses given by the NSs were used as the correct option for the pragmatic awareness test and received 2 points. The other alternatives for each item were picked out from the sociopragmatically inappropriate or the pragmalinguistically inaccurate responses given by NNSs to the pragmatic production items. Two native speakers were consulted to make sure about the inappropriateness or inaccuracy of the distractors. In addition, the multiple choice pragmatic comprehension test was administered to 20 American students to make sure the correct option and the distractors are functioning as intended.

Phase II. Instruction. The scope of this study was limited to the request, apology, and complaint speech acts. The rationales behind this selection was, firstly, the fact that these speech acts are observed most frequently in daily communications of any speaker and, thus, are worth paying attention in any needs analysis of L2 learners. Secondly, these speech acts are the most empirically-explored speech acts in the cross-cultural or interlanguage pragmatics literature and, as a result, could easily be incorporated into explicit metapragmatic instruction.

Two groups of Isfahan University students participated in this phase of the study. The students were in their eighth semester of English language study and on the verge of graduation. The researcher randomly assigned one group as *control group* (32) and the other one as *experimental group* (34). Also the “comprehension test” developed to test the subjects’ pragmatic awareness of speech act realisation patterns was administered as a *pretest* to both groups. The activities and the extra focus on pragmatic development activities in the experimental group were explained in the syllabus of the course and considered as part of the course requirements. [-5-]

Then, the twelve-session explicit metapragmatic instruction, or the treatment, began as follows. It should be mentioned that the pragmatic instruction took about 30 minutes of each 2 hour class period because the course instructors had their own course teaching agenda to follow as well. The instruction was basically organized, planned, scheduled, and given to the subjects either by researchers or by MA students under the supervision of the researchers. The explicit metapragmatic instructional activities included description, explanation, teacher-fronted discussion, small-group discussions, role plays, pragmatically focused tasks, and introspective feedback. The different instructional activities used are listed below:

1. The explicit metapragmatic instruction for the experimental groups began by a teacher-fronted discussion of various meanings a single utterance might convey in different contexts (e.g., “it is hot in here”). Examples were provided of different speech acts emphasizing the fact that a specific form can have several functions in the language and one function can be realized through different forms depending on contextual variables.
2. After teacher fronted discussion students were divided into different groups and asked to come up with examples of the target speech acts (e.g., requests) in their L1 and L2 and to discuss the differences and similarities in the realization patterns of the speech acts in L1

and L2.

3. Student volunteers were asked to do role play of the intended speech acts for the whole class.
4. Frequent sociopragmatic or paralinguistic deviations observed in students' examples were taken as teaching points and pertinent metapragmatic information or comments on the intended speech act set was provided to the whole class. Necessary reference was made to the instructional materials students had in order to further establish and internalize the relevant metapragmatic knowledge for any pattern and strategies of the intended speech act. The materials, as mentioned before, were prepared by the researchers based on the available literature on the intended speech acts.
5. A discourse completion task like the following was provided to the groups to come up with a speech act appropriate to the situation and to compare their strategies with other members in their group.

You have lent your notes to a classmate a couple of weeks ago. Now you need them yourself, so you go to him/her and say:

Your friend wants you to fill out a questionnaire for his/her research. You want to take it home, so you say:

6. Students were then provided with dialogues in English and asked to extract the intended speech acts performed by native speakers in those dialogues and to compare it with their own strategies.

In the control group classrooms, no explicit metapragmatic instruction was given. The students were just taught in accordance with the usual instructional programs of the university. The dialogues were read out loud to them without any explicit metapragmatic instruction.

After the completion of the 12-week period, the multiple choice pragmatic awareness test was administered to the participants.

Design of the Study

The impracticalities involved in planning *True Experimental* designs for conducting research in the field of Applied Linguistics in any setting, are overwhelming. Because of practical limitations, a true random sampling was not possible and intact groups were used. Therefore a *pretest [treatment] posttest control group design* was adopted in this study. [-6-]

Data Analysis

To ensure the comparability of the two EFL groups in terms of pragmatic knowledge of speech acts, the DCT developed for this study was administered to the two groups at the beginning of the study. Summary of the findings for both groups on the pretest is provided in Table 1. The result of the t-test showed that there is no significant difference between the two groups before the treatment. Therefore, it could be concluded that the two groups were homogeneous in terms of pragmatic comprehension of the speech acts under study.

Table 1. Summary of data for both groups (pre-test)

Group	N	X	SD
Experimental	34	30.00	6.40
Control	32	30.70	6.89

t observed= 0.42 $P \leq 0.05$

In order to check the effect of explicit metapragmatic instruction on the speech act comprehension of the students a posttest was administered to both groups. An independent sample t-test was used to compare the mean score of the two groups. As shown in Table 2, a significant difference in the performance of the two groups was found at $P \leq 0.05$ level.

Table 2. Summary of data for both groups (post-test)

Group	N	X	SD
Experimental	34	46.00	8.67
Control	32	35.50	6.90

t observed= 5.49 * Significant at $P \leq 0.05$

Conclusion

Overall, the results from the data analysis supported the claim that explicit metapragmatic instruction facilitates interlanguage pragmatic development. Although this study did not deal with the 'sequence' of acquiring speech act patterns and strategies, it showed that explicit metapragmatic instruction in these patterns and strategies makes significant contributions to the learners' speech act comprehension processes. The results revealed that pragmatic competence does not seem resistant to explicit metapragmatic instruction.

The results of this study support the claim that L2 learners may not detect relevant input features in purely meaning-based L2 use (c.f., Schmidt, 1983; Schmidt & Frota, 1986). It is claimed that in order for noticing to happen, input might have to be made salient through input enhancement, which will raise the learners' consciousness about the target features.

The findings of this study shed light on the rather controversial issue of what effects—if any—explicit instruction has on interlanguage development in an EFL setting. As indicated, result of the data analysis of this study showed that explicit metapragmatic instruction by providing input enhancement in the L2 classroom, raising L2 learners' awareness about the input features, and engaging students in productive class activities and language use precipitated and facilitated IL pragmatic development to a considerable degree. The study shows the pivotal role that explicit instruction can play in EFL settings. [-7-]

The study contributes to the theory of interlanguage pragmatic development. As noted earlier, pragmatic ability in another language is an important component of an ELL's communicative competence and must be incorporated in a model of communicative ability. Although Schmidt (1993, p. 21) points out that 'there has been little discussion of how pragmatic abilities are acquired in a second language', much has been contributed to interlanguage pragmatics since then. Studies have flourished within the field with the eventual aim of providing finding answers to such issues as teachability of pragmatic competence, the need for teaching L2 pragmatics and, the best instructional measures to develop pragmatic competence. These issues, as indicated, have received far too little attention in FLT contexts. This study, as a result, can have very valuable theoretical and pedagogical implications and applications for this under-visited area.

The results of the pretest showed that even advanced learners of English did not have pragmatic awareness of speech acts in the absence of any pertinent instruction. This implies that some form of metapragmatic instruction—deductive, inductive, implicit, or explicit—is necessary. According to Kasper (1999), L2 classrooms afford L2 learners the opportunity to reflect on their communicative encounters and to experiment with different pragmatic options. For EFL learners, however, the classroom may be the only available setting where they can try out what using the foreign language feels like, and how much more or less comfortable they are with various aspects of L2 pragmatics.

In addition, a prerequisite for pragmatic instruction is the availability of especially prepared and appropriately tuned materials, like books, speech act scenario-based films with on-screen captions, cassettes, etc. Unfortunately, there is the scarcity of materials suited for pragmatic development of students. Therefore, material developers can, following Bardovi-Harlig (1996), adopt a "speech acts framework" in planning, developing, or writing instructional materials. Many of the recent language textbooks have attempted to incorporate sociocultural information as an integral part of language functions. However, they often fail to base their selections on theoretical descriptions and research evidence on language functions. There is a vast amount of literature on most speech acts, documenting and revealing how they are performed by NSs of English with various features in different social contexts. Based on the available literature, materials could be developed in order to teach students the patterns, rules, strategies, and linguistic forms by means of which the important speech acts are interpreted and realized in different contexts. It is necessary, therefore, for textbooks and teaching syllabuses to reflect the constantly widening scope of sociocultural research related to speech acts.

Teaching Implications

Pedagogical decisions concerning what and how to teach speech act behavior are based on the student population and their goals. It seems to us that the first step toward acquisition of pragmatic rules of speech act realization patterns is a program aimed at sensitizing learners to cultural differences in speech act behavior across languages. Making the learner aware of major patterns of behavior in the target language and of available choices for speech act realization may well help learners become better users of pragmatic input in L2 and help them make informed choices in the speech act production as they become more proficient. [-8-]

There is a vast amount of literature describing what major semantic formulas make up the English speech acts of requesting, apologizing, and complimenting. . For the purpose of syllabus design, we would assume that the learner needs to know how to interpret and produce

these speech acts in a variety of interactive discourse situations in the target language. However, in what contexts, and which of these speech acts learners are most likely to come across must be considered by teachers and syllabus designers in each case.

Once we have developed a list of most likely encountered situations for each of the speech acts relevant for a particular group of learners, we need to decide which of the realization patterns are suitable for the early part of the course and which should be left for a later stage. Such sequencing decisions would depend mostly on the immediate needs of the learners and linguistic complexity of the specific speech act realization patterns.

The next step in the syllabus design process would be to decide which and how many semantic formulas should be introduced at each point in the syllabus or in each class session based on the selected situations.

In order to empower learners to make their own choices, we need to expose them to patterns used most commonly by native speakers of the L2. Speech act research is abundant and can be used by teachers to expose students to the most prevalent patterns of language use for different speech functions. Manes and Wolfson (1981) and Wolfson (1989) emphasize the regular structure, highly formulaic, and the astonishing repetitiveness of English compliments, for example. Studies on apologies further illustrate the little variation in apology speech act formulas in English (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981). Furthermore, literature on requestive speech acts have shown the relative regularity of realization patterns for requesting in English (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989)

It seems appropriate then to incorporate the most common linguistic forms native speakers use to realize a speech act at the beginning, while the various subformulas and supportive moves that either mitigate or intensify the force of the speech act can be introduced gradually as learners become more proficient.

A critical issue in relation to conforming to target language community norms is the willingness or necessity for ELLs to perform according to the target community pragmatic norms. Most ELLs in this study are going to be future teachers of English and we have assumed that they are desirous of improving L2 pragmatics, especially pragmatic awareness. We have provided input to learners that goes beyond teacher-fronted, status unequal input and assisted learners with their pragmatic comprehension. As Bardovi-Harlig (2001, p. 30) mention promoting pragmatic comprehension and providing authentic input to learners provides them with a 'fighting chance' and empowers them to make informed decisions in their pragmatic choices. Learners need to recognize the social function of different speech acts and the significance of different degrees of indirectness. Making contextualized, pragmatically appropriate language input available to learners in an EFL context in which they don't have the chance to encounter this input outside the classroom is pedagogically necessary and politically right. Helping students to understand the way pragmatic principles operate in other cultures, encouraging them to look for the different pragmatic or discursal norms which may underlie national and ethnic stereotyping, is pedagogically necessary. Such techniques, I would suggest, are desirable both pedagogically and politically. To give the learner the knowledge and tools to make an informed choice and allowing her/him the freedom to flout pragmatic conventions, is to acknowledge her/his individuality and freedom of choice and to respect her/his system of values and beliefs (Thomas, 1983). The adoption of sociocultural rules as one's own in L2 pragmatic production is an individual decision. However it is our responsibility to equip the learners with enough knowledge to make an informed choice and to not inadvertently convey messages they did not intend. [-9-]

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[-12-]