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A Need for Pragmatic Instruction

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Abstract

This article reports on the findings of an on-line survey related to the necessity of pragmatic instruction in helping Japanese students competently greet and respond to greetings in American English. Methods in the instruction and assessment of language functions and language-use situations are also discussed. It is hypothesized that proper instructions in pragmatic rules supported by comprehensive assessment that frame CLT methodology will greatly enhance the learning experience and produce the improvements sought after in the EFL classroom. This article is adopted from a PhD dissertation that fully explores this important topic (Zeff, B. 2018).

Introduction

Acknowledging the need for pragmatic instruction in the language classroom is not new (Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 1998; Tajeddin, 2008). Yet, explicit pragmatic instruction has traditionally played a very small role in language classrooms throughout Japan (Zeff, 2011) where language instruction generally follows the pedagogical model of grammar explanations, rote memorization, and the translation of passages (Ishihara, 2011a). As a result, what often happens in Japan is that students with high discrete point test scores may fail to develop basic communication skills. This

paradox exemplifies what Bardovi-Harlig (2001) meant when she expressed that “a learner of high grammatical proficiency will not necessarily possess concomitant pragmatic competence” (p.14).

Much research has been done on the pragmatics of the speech act of apologies. This speech act in particular can be seen as a source of pragmatic failure in Japan. According to Cohen (2008), “Research on apologies has found that there are a series of strategies that are specific to the performance of apologies in many different languages in a variety of speech communities” (p. 120). Apologies could be considered a major linguistic device for politeness. Most language programs teach language for communication in its polite form. It is expected that students learn proper conduct while using the L2. Olshtain and Cohen (1989) stated that “the strategies used to perform apologies are largely universal” (p.171).

Looking at aspects of universals in linguistic politeness, apologies in Japanese play a very important role in communication but serve a very different role in Western cultures. Ellis (1994) described apologies as “face-threatening acts which are part of the elements necessary in politeness theory” (p.174). Ide (1989) commented that “politeness in Japanese often falls outside of the framework or play a minor part” (p.224) in the politeness principles described by Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1987). Nonaka (2000) suggested that for the Japanese to use the expression, “I’m sorry,” they do it to show consideration towards their interlocutor’s feelings. They do this even if the speaker is not at fault.

Americans tend to only apologize if they consider themselves in the wrong. Kumagai (1993) has made similar distinctions, describing Japanese apologies as “penitent” and American as “rational.” Other speech acts that have been investigated in their effect on Japanese communication skills are requests (Kasper, 2000), compliments (Ishihara, 2003) and requests (Takimoto, 2009a).

Online Survey of Native English-Speaking EFL Teachers in Japan

¹Japanese students of English have a difficult time making a greeting that would appear to be appropriate or polite to the native speaker. An unpublished online survey by the author in 2016 of 75 native English-speaking EFL teachers throughout Japan (see Appendix A) showed that they perceived a problem with the English greeting practices of native Japanese speakers across a range of social contexts. When asked about how their students returned greetings in English, 32% (n=24) of respondents reported receiving contextually unexpected return greetings and 14% (n=11) found the greetings to be non-proficient or unnatural. Respondents' comments indicated the greeting speech act was mostly conducted with a basic pattern and without complex routines. They specifically mentioned the case of addressing a professor without a title (i.e., "Smith" instead of "Professor" or "Mr. Smith"), receiving a response of "Good morning" regardless of the time of day, and experiencing confused or shyly proffered greetings particularly in less common contexts or in response to nonstandard greetings. By far the biggest indicator of problematic greeting practices occurred when respondents were approached by people unknown to them; fewer than 10% (n=8) of responses were termed unproblematic while close to 40% (n=30) were considered inappropriate. Such problems could indicate a need for instruction in this important speech act.²

Pragmatic Instruction: Explicit vs. Implicit

One study showing the value of explicit pragmatic instruction in the Japanese language classroom was conducted by Takimoto (2009a). By focusing on one part of the speech act of requesting, Takimoto charted the

development of learners' pragmatic proficiency. His study used structured input in the form of explicit pragmatic instruction and awareness-raising tasks to learn bi-clausal expressions as politeness markers in request forms. A bi-clausal expression is an extra polite expression used to make a request that the speaker may consider particularly face threatening by its imposition on the hearer or because of the relationship the speaker has with the speaker in regard to power or distance from the hearer's in regard to intimacy.

The purpose of Takimoto's instruction was to get his students to understand the role of politeness markers better when making requests that may be considered a high rate of imposition on the hearer. Such situations include asking a neighbor, with whom one has not had much interaction, to water the plants while on vacation, or asking a neighbor for a ride to school (Zeff, 2016).

Takimoto (2009) used a pre-, post-, and follow-up test in his study. The pretest was administered two to three days prior to the instructional treatment. Eight to nine days after the instruction, a posttest was administered. Four weeks after the study was completed, a follow-up test was given. For all testing periods, an acceptability judgement test (AJT) and a listening test (LT) were given, as well as a DCT and a role play test (RT). He found in his results a positive effect from the explicit pragmatic instruction and concluded that there was an effect on the development of pragmatic awareness regarding requests. Takimoto's work was an attempt in Japan to answer the call by Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998), who stated that "increased pragmatic awareness should be one goal of classroom instruction" (p.255).

Takimoto's (2009) study was not the first to document the positive effect of pragmatic instruction in the Japanese classroom. Ishihara (2003) examined EFL students' ability to give and respond to compliments after

explicit pragmatic instruction. Ishihara (2011b) said, when discussing this study, that “instruction probably facilitated learner’s improvement not only in terms of performance but also awareness of giving and responding to compliments” (p.75). Even though pragmatic language instruction plays a minor role in Japan (Ishihara, 2010; Kakiuchi, 2005), the call for its use and its demonstrated impact are well established (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Lyster, 1994; Matsumura, 2003). These impacts can affect students’ awareness of and abilities in communicative competence.

Managing Communicative Ability

When linguists talk about how learners develop communicative language ability, they usually look at two different but related things. The first are interactional acts. These refer to acts that give structure to discourse by ensuring one utterance leads to another (Ellis, 2001). This involves turn taking, knowing when one’s turn is over and the next turn begins in a conversation, openings and closing, and temporal and spatial considerations (Have, 2007). Are there rules for doing these things? How do people manage conversations? How do people negotiate meaning? What do people do if they do not understand something someone said? How do people repair a conversation that breaks down? All of these questions are part of understanding how discourse is structured (Schegloff, 1991). These questions are also pertinent to classroom instruction of pragmatics.

The EFL Classroom

Through casual observation of a group of students in a class, teachers can pick out certain communicative abilities or lack thereof. Ellis (2002) and Kirsner (1994) have pointed out the difficulty of observing implicit

knowledge: how do teachers know what their students know or do not know? To confound this problem even more, there is the Observer's Paradox that says the only way to collect real data for research is for the researcher to be invisible from the subjects being observed for research (Labov, 1972). It seems possible that there is a way to reconfigure the research design to allow for stealth observations of implicit knowledge (Schmidt, 1994). In so doing, teachers would be able to research and determine the effectiveness of teaching these pragmatic rules for the EFL student with no other way to experience these acts other than in the language class.

Communicative Language Ability: Assessment

Language instruction often depends on textbooks to introduce forms and language for students to learn and practice (Ishihara, 2011a). Unfortunately, it is impossible for textbooks to address all the variations possible for a given speech act. Yet, it is vitally important to introduce students to the fact that such variations exist (Kakiuchi, 2005).

³Although evaluating an understanding of language functions can be challenging for any teacher, assessment is an important part of teaching the greeting speech act. Because the purpose of pragmatic instruction is to prepare students for the variability of discourse, one can pair the assessment tool with the objective of the awareness-raising tasks. Understandably, no one type of assessment meets all needs. For assessing performance, as is required when evaluating conversations in pairs or groups of three or more, oral or written feedback works well. The feedback can include comments on key phrases use as well as tonal quality and awareness of hesitations and non-verbal cues.

DCTs can aid in assessing L2 pragmatics. Some instructors see the “T” as representing “test” whereas others prefer the “T” to represent “task.” This change of focus involves re-tasking the examples used into a testing environment with timed responses. I refer to a DCT as representing a “test” throughout this dissertation, and I use the phrase *discourse completion task* to signify a “task.” A scaled assessment also can be used to evaluate students’ awareness of an answer’s appropriateness in a written example of a greeting exchange. This is referred to as the acceptability judgement test (AJT). For instance, one might use a scale from “most appropriate” to “least appropriate” below a written greeting; the students are asked to rate the example on that scale and their responses are assessed (Ross & Kasper, 2013). Finally, a rubric is a helpful tool for both the students and teachers to break down the functions involved in greetings.⁴

Conclusion

Where greetings are an easily identifiable speech act in communication, other speech acts can be a focus using the available tools for teaching the language necessary for communicating competently. The survey at the beginning of this paper brings to the forefront the necessity for addressing this important issue in the language classroom.

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² This is the end of the passage cited from the journal article.

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APPENDIX A:

Survey 2016: English Greeting Practices in Japan

English Greeting Practices in Japan

This is a short survey about your experience with using English greetings in Japan. This survey will provide data for a dissertation toward pragmatics. In this survey, the word “natural” means speech that demonstrates communicative competence and understanding of the social context. Communicative competence includes appropriateness in communication, as in saying the right thing in a given context, and politeness, as in saying it in the right way. I appreciate your taking the time to do this survey.

1. In your experience as an EFL instructor in Japan, when your Japanese friends or work colleagues greet you in English, does it sound natural?

☐ Yes. No problem.

☐ The greetings basically are fine, but they are not something I would hear in my country.

☐ Sometimes the greetings are not what I am expecting.

☐ I do not consider them natural.

☐ Other: Please provide an example of such a greeting here.

2. In your experience as an EFL instructor in Japan, do your own English greetings to Japanese friends or work colleagues typically receive natural responses?

☐ Yes. No problem.

☐ The greetings basically are fine, but they are not something I

would hear in my country.

__Sometimes the greetings are not what I am expecting.

__I do not consider them natural.

__Other: Please provide an example of such a greeting here.

3. In your experience as an EFL instructor in Japan, do your Japanese students typically greet you using English in natural ways?

__Yes. No problem.

__The greetings basically are fine, but they are not something I would hear in my country.

__Sometimes the greetings are not what I am expecting.

__I do not consider them natural.

__Other: Please provide an example of such a greeting here.

4. In your experience as an EFL instructor in Japan, do your own English greetings to Japanese students typically receive natural responses?

__Yes. No problem.

__The greetings basically are fine, but they are not something I would hear in my country.

__Sometimes the greetings are not what I am expecting.

__I do not consider them natural.

__Other: Please provide an example of such a greeting here.

5. In your experience living in Japan, have Japanese speakers who are unknown to you greeted you in English? If yes, did it sound natural? (If no, leave blank.)

__Yes. No problem.

__The greetings basically are fine, but they are not something I

would hear in my country.

__ Sometimes the greetings are not what I am expecting.

__ I do not consider them natural.

__ Other: Please provide an example of such a greeting here.

6. I am an EFL teacher of English in Japan from:

__ Japan

__ America

__ Canada

__ England

__ Australia

__ Another country (Name the country here)

7. My native language is:

__ English

__ Other (please specify)

8. What is your gender?

__ Female

__ Male

9. How old are you?

__ 18-23 __ 24-35 __ 36-45 __ Over 45