

## Review of “Pragmatics in Language Teaching”

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#### 1 Introduction

This book is the first edited volume devoted solely to classroom research on L2 (both second and foreign) pragmatics. The central goal of this book is to present what has been done in data-based classroom research to this date and illustrate the wide range of research approaches, focusing on two crucial dimensions of L2 pragmatics, namely, teachability and assessment.

Defining pragmatics as the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context (p. 2), Part I (“*Theoretical and Empirical Background*”) provides the theoretical and empirical background to the data-based studies in the volume. In Chapter 2, reviewing empirical evidence from the speech act perspective, Bardovi-Harlig discusses how native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs) differ in their use of pragmatic knowledge in both production and comprehension. In Chapter 3, Kasper provides an extensive review of the classroom-based research from 1976 (Long, Adams, McLean & Castanos) to the present, covering 12 observational and 17 interventional<sup>1</sup> studies.

Part II “*Issues in Classroom-based Learning of Pragmatics*” presents three data-based studies which investigate what learners could learn from a given situation of classroom language learning. Part III “*The Effects of Instruction in Pragmatics*” consists of five chapters examining the effect of particular instructions in a variety of aspects of L2 pragmatics. The final chapter “*The Assessment of Pragmatic Ability*” illustrates different approaches to the testing of pragmatic competence, describing the variety of testing instruments which are currently available and also discussing the issue of developing new instruments.

Although there is no universally accepted definition of what components make up communicative competence, most linguists since Hymes (1972) agree that grammatical competence alone cannot explain how speakers use language to communicate and that pragmatic competence has long been recognized as a crucial component of communicative competence. In addition, as we will see in Kasper’s extensive review, most of the previous data-based classroom research investigated ESL/EFL learners’ pragmatic competence/development. However, research on L2 pragmatics has been extended to other languages as well, as shown in this volume. Even though this might not be the case with all Asian languages (cf. e.g. Wang, 2006), instructors of Asian languages should benefit from research-based recommendations for pragmatic learning from recent L2 pragmatic literature. In this book review for e-FLT’s supplementary issue, which specifically focuses on the teaching and learning of Asian languages, I will review four data-based

research which investigated JFL (Japanese as a foreign language) learners' pragmatic competence/development – two observational studies from Part II and two interventional studies from Part III – with view to their usefulness for Japanese language instructors.

## 2 Review of chapters on pragmatics and Japanese as a foreign language

### 2.1 Chapter 5: “Why can’t learners of JFL distinguish polite from impolite speech styles?”

This section looks at Chapter 5 in Part II of the book on “Issues in Classroom-based Learning of Pragmatics”. The chapter is written by Haruko Minegishi Cook and entitled “Why can’t learners of JFL distinguish polite from impolite speech styles?”

Drawing on Gumperz’ (e.g. 1982, 1996) framework of “contextualization cues,” Cook investigates JFL learners’ pragmatic awareness of a Japanese polite speech style. Contextualization cues are surface linguistic features which help listeners to interpret the social/pragmatic meaning associated with these linguistic features. Japanese is rich in morphological contextualization cues. Thus, even though the referential content is the same, the indexed social/pragmatic meaning could be different. For example, the following three phrases *Doozo yoroshiku*, *Doozo yosroshiku onegai shimasu*, and *Doozo yoroshiku onegai itashimasu* all have the same referential content “Please treat me well,” but the levels of politeness are different with longer ones being more polite, indicating more humbleness (p. 92).

120 JFL learners were given a listening comprehension task, in which they were asked to listen to three job applicants seeking a part-time position from a clothing company and to judge the politeness level of their self-introductory speeches. The results were that 80% of the learners focused only on the referential content and were unable to recognize the impolite speech style indexed by co-occurring linguistic features, which include the plain (or dictionary) verb form, the informal contracted verb form, and the sentence final particle *yo* (e.g. *Nihonjin ga donna fasshon ga suki ka yoku shitteru yo* – “I know well what kind of fashion Japanese people like”; p. 87, emphasis mine). They were unable to recognize polite hedges such as *to omoimasu* (“I think”) either.

On the other hand, having interviewed instructors, Cook found that except for the difference between the formal *masu* and informal plain verb forms, the instructors were not aware of the co-occurring features which contributed to the impolite speech style. Accordingly, no explicit instruction was given in respect to the pragmatic meaning indexed by these features. Based on the findings, Cook suggests that it is necessary to teach a range of co-occurring linguistic features that constitute a particular speech style and that it is important for these features, especially the relationship between a linguistic form and its social meaning, to be brought to learners’ attention so that they will become more noticeable.

### 2.2 Chapter 6: “A longitudinal study of the development of expression of alignment in Japanese as a foreign language”

This section looks at Chapter 6, also in Part II, authored by Amy Snyder Ohta on “A longitudinal study of the development of expression of alignment in Japanese as a foreign language.”

Ohta examines the development of interactional competence of JFL learners, more specifically, how two adult JFL learners develop their ability to use the follow-up turn of the IRF routine in order to express acknowledgement (of the previous speaker’s contribution) and alignment (with the interlocutor). The IRF is a typical classroom routine which consists of three turns, Initiation, Response, and Follow-up, as shown in the following example.

Teacher: S2-san, unagi o tabemasu ka?	[Initiation]
Do you eat eel, S2?	
Student: <i>Hai, tabemasu.</i>	[Response]

Yes, I do.  
 Teacher: Tabemasu (.) oishii desu ne:. [Follow-up]  
 You do (.) It's good.

(Ohta, p. 109)

Ohta notes that whether they participated peripherally (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as the teacher interacted with others, or participated more directly as the interlocutors of the teacher, the learners were exposed to the teacher's model.

Ohta examined these two learners over one academic year and found that they followed a similar developmental sequence moving from expressing acknowledgement to alignment. At the beginning, in the fall quarter, neither of them used the follow-up turn for acknowledgement or alignment. But in early winter, both of them began to show acknowledgement, which however, was laughter or simply the repetition of what the previous speaker said. A month later, the learners began to use *Aa soo desu ka* "Is that right?" to express acknowledgement. Toward the end of the spring quarter, both showed a dramatic increase in the appropriate use of follow-up turns, including *ne*-marked alignments (e.g. *Ii desu ne* "That's good" or *Zannen desu ne* "That's too bad") which express appreciation of or empathy with the interlocutor's response. Ohta states that the learners developed their interactional competence not only as speakers but also as listeners who were able to respond to the interlocutor's contributions appropriately. The learners acquired the culturally-appropriate listener behavior and moved from those of acknowledgement to alignment over time, which is evidence of the power of both peripheral and direct participations and also reveals the potential of FL classrooms for pragmatic learning.

### 2.3 Chapter 10: "Explicit and implicit teaching of pragmatic routines: Japanese *sumimasen*"

This section looks at Chapter 10 in Part III of the book on "The Effects of Instruction in Pragmatics". The chapter is written by Yumiko Tateyama on "Explicit and implicit teaching of pragmatic routines: Japanese *sumimasen*".

In this Chapter, Tateyama reports on her investigation on the effects of explicit and implicit instruction in the use of a Japanese routine formula *sumimasen* on beginning JFL learners. This commonly-used Japanese phrase has three different functions, i.e. getting attention ("Excuse me"), apologizing ("I'm sorry"), and expressing gratitude ("Thank you"). Both explicit and implicit groups were given four treatments over an eight-week period. The explicit group received explanations on the use of *sumimasen* and watched video clips which included this routine. The implicit group received no explanations but only watched the same video clips. Two measures were used for this study. A week after the first and fourth treatments, the learners were asked to perform a role-play with an NS and also complete a multiple-choice test, which were followed by two different kinds of self-report, namely, a questionnaire (on the multiple-choice test) and a retrospective interview (on the role-play performance). The results were that both the multiple-choice tests and role-plays showed no statistically significant difference between the two groups, although the effect of explicit instructions was clearer in her pilot study (Tateyama, Kasper, Mui, Tay & Thananart, 1997). However, close examination of the multiple-choice test results reveal that the explicit group performed better in items which involved higher formality, indebtedness, and severity of offence. On the other hand, the explicit group became overly polite, which suggests that the explicit instruction resulted in teaching-induced hyper-correction. Tateyama suspects that some intervening variables – motivation, the amount of contact with L1-speakers outside of class, or students' academic performance – might have affected the effectiveness of instruction. However, despite these limitations, the author suggests that interactional routines seem to be teachable even to beginners before they develop analyzed second language knowledge.

## 2.4 Chapter 11: “Explicit instruction and JFL learner’s use of interactional discourse markers”

This chapter looks at Chapter 11, also in Part III, by Dina Rudolph Yoshimi on “Explicit instruction and JFL learner’s use of interactional discourse markers”.

In Chapter 11, Yoshimi examines the effects of explicit instruction on JFL learners in the use of Japanese discourse markers in non-formal, extended tellings (i.e. narrative). The discourse markers *n desu*, *n desu kedo*, and *n desu ne* are narrative-relevant devices which have organizational and interactional functions, that is, maintaining the flow of narrative and signaling which information is or is not important to the interlocutors. The participants were divided into experimental and control groups. The experimental group received explicit instruction which consisted of (1) the explanatory handout, (2) the native speaker (NS) model, (3) the planning session (composing their stories with NSs), (4) communicative practice (perform their planned telling to a NS), and (5) feedback (given by the NSs). The experimental group received such explicit instruction three times per week over 16 weeks, which was withheld from the control group except for regular, in-class small group interaction with NSs. The data were composed of the experimental and control groups’ pre- and post-treatment storytelling and also three additional sets of data from the experimental group’s communicative practice. The quantitative analysis reveals that in the post-treatment storytelling, the experimental group made significant gains in both frequency and accuracy (i.e. not producing errors), while no discourse markers were produced by the control group, which indicates the beneficial effects of explicit instruction. However, the learners’ performance did not fully reflect what was taught about the effective use of discourse markers, which might be explained by intervening variables such as instructional gaps and instructional time. Nonetheless, Yoshimi suggests that the beneficial effects of explicit instruction combined with communicative practice and feedback have been shown to be supported for the production of non-formal, extended tellings.

## 3 Conclusion

A review of classroom-based research on L2 pragmatics reveals both the limitations and potential of L2 classroom for pragmatic development, both of which, however, as the editors state, can be explored only through data-based studies. Kasper and Rose, the editors, note that in order to investigate how pragmatic learning is shaped by instructional contexts and activities, the following three questions require examination: (1) what pragmatic components could be teachable, (2) what opportunities for developing L2 pragmatic competence are offered in the classroom, and (3) what kind of instructional approaches are available and how effective they are. As we have seen, L2 pragmatic literature informs us of the answers to these questions.

Kasper and Rose (also Kasper, 1997 & 1992) state that there is a considerable amount of L2 pragmatic knowledge available to adult learners, which they can obtain without receiving specific instructions; some pragmatic knowledge is claimed to be universal, or it is successfully transferred from L1 to L2 (i.e. positive transfer). Adult learners, however, do not always use such information. The implication is that learners need instruction – pedagogic intervention for pragmatic development – so that they might be aware of such universal or L1-transferable pragmatic knowledge and use it in L2 contexts. The studies on JFL classroom in this volume offer valuable insights in respect to which components could/should be taught and what kind of instructional approaches are available. In addition, regarding the second question, it is well-documented that L2 classroom, especially traditional teacher-fronted one, does not offer good learning environments for developing pragmatic competence. Although classroom discourse itself is authentic institutional discourse (Kasper, 1997), most of the exchanges are transactional knowledge transmission, which is not interactionally motivated. However, Ohta’s study has shown the potential of FL classrooms for pragmatic development, which was revealed even through the typical IRF routine in the teacher-fronted classroom.

It should be noted, however, that whether instructors could truly benefit from research-based recommendations for pragmatic learning depends on their own pragmatic awareness. As Cook correctly points out, instructors need to be aware/knowledgeable of pragmatic components so that they could bring them to learners' attention. In fact, all four studies on the JFL classroom presented quite detailed analyses, which might make their findings less accessible to language instructors who are not knowledgeable about the Japanese communicative style. Nevertheless, considering that Japanese is a context-sensitive language characterized by a preference for an indirect mode of communication (e.g. Okazaki, 2003; Yamada, 1997), sensitizing learners to such pragmatic information is important. The significant task of language instructors is to raise learners' pragmatic awareness and provide more opportunities for communicative practice in classroom. To this end, I believe that this book should be a valuable resource for Japanese language instructors and also for those of other Asian languages who seek to develop L2 learners' pragmatic competence in the classroom setting.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Interventional" studies refer here to those which examine the effect of a particular instructional treatment.

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