Teaching Pragmatics and Instructed Second Language Learning: Study Abroad and Technology-Enhanced Teaching
By Nicola Halenko (2020)

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Pragmatics is teachable and is as fundamental for communication as knowing the grammatical aspects of an L2. These principles are now widely known, but there is still a large gap to be filled in this regard, especially when it comes to foreign language teaching materials. As a way of bringing contributions to the improvement of this scenario, the study under review aimed to investigate whether there are differences, in terms of effectiveness, between explicit instruction on British English pragmatic aspects – with particular emphasis on an interactive tool named oral computer-animated production task (CAPT) as opposed to paper-based tasks – and learning purely based on the contact with the target language/culture. The research participants were mainly Chinese adults, international students at a university in the UK, and the investigated speech acts were requests and apologies, carried out within a conversational genre named institutional talk.

Comprising ten chapters, the volume begins with an overall approach to the numerous themes which pervade the study. In chapter 2, the author outlines an overview of studies in L2 and SLA pragmatics, discussing both concepts and seminal works from the 1980s and 1990s, in which the idea of communicative competence had great relevance, and more recent studies, in which the notions of interactional and intercultural competence are increasingly present. There is also a section dedicated to Speech Acts Theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) and Politeness Theory (Brown

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and Levinson 1987). Indeed, according to the author, previous research indicates that communicating appropriately in the UK can be difficult for English learners from countries that operate mostly according to the norms of positive politeness, such as China (Gu 1990; Mao 1994; Matsumoto 1989; Yu 1999, 2011), because their language can sound impolite to British speakers, whose culture is associated with negative politeness (Hofstede 2005; Ogiermann 2009).

In chapter 3, the focus is on discussing instructed L2 pragmatics. The author cites studies by other researchers to argue that it is essential to increase learners’ awareness of different pragmatic functions and provide them with tools that can help them develop their pragmatic competence autonomously. Then, more specific topics related to teaching practice are discussed, such as study abroad instruction, teaching techniques, speech acts and pragmatic routines. In chapter 4, based on essential works on the theme, requests and apologies – the two speech acts investigated throughout the research – are examined. Each of them has a section with studies about their teaching and learning, specifically in cases where the informants were from East Asian cultures (Japan, South Korea and China).

In chapter 5, the author explains the motivations for the use of a mixed experimental design (QUAL-QUAN) according to Creswell and Plano Clark (2010), in addition to a quasi-experimental approach, as described by Creswell (2009). Furthermore, by describing data collection methodologies highly used in research in the field of pragmatics, the author justifies the use of CAPT.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to a detailed description of the methodology used in the research. Initially, the procedures and results of the pilot test are described, as well as the results of the perception questionnaire applied after the experiments. Then, the focus is on the main study, which included pre- and posttests and three groups of informants (60 subjects in total): an experimental group exposed to explicit activities using CAPT; a second experimental group exposed to explicit paper-based activities and a control group that did not receive any instruction, but, as well as the other ones, answered a questionnaire to measure the use and learning of the language related to requests and apologies in English.

In chapter 7, the author describes the results related to the production of requests and apologies. For each of these speech acts the raters’ assessment of their level of appropriacy are initially presented, followed by a pragmalinguistic analysis of the strategies used by learners in pre- and posttests. Chapter 8 presents the results related to self-assessment questionnaires in English language use during the study abroad period, applied to all groups, as both pre- and posttest.
Chapter 9 consists of a discussion of the results, in which every research question presented in chapter 5 is answered, also referring to the existing literature on the subject. Finally, in chapter 10, the author recapitulates what was discussed throughout the volume, highlighting what she considers valuable contributions to the area and offering foreign language teachers recommendations based on the evidence found in the results.

The volume has a balanced structure and allows the reader to follow and understand all the nuances of the study. The chapter in which the methodology is described, for example, is quite detailed, enabling the replication of the experiment by other researchers, which was one of the author’s intentions. Furthermore, a remarkable contribution of the study is that it deals with CAPT, a teaching tool that is still little used and whose effectiveness is also poorly described in empirical studies. As the author herself indicates, this resource still needs improvements, but it can create more credible conditions for interaction for students, who may even have contact with prosodic aspects of the target language.

As for the results, in addition to corroborating previous research regarding the effectiveness of explicit instruction, they offer interesting points for the discussion about how the concepts of positive and negative politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) can still be applied to understanding and solving negative pragmatic transfer issues in learners of a target language whose culture is diametrically different from theirs.

Therefore, the volume can be of great interest for researchers of L2 pragmatics and ISLA, given the complex experimental design of the study and its results, which might motivate discussions that refer to a well-defined and rich theoretical framework. On the other hand, foreign language teachers may also draw on the suggestions provided by the author regarding the design of the instruction given to the experimental groups as a strategy to enrich the teaching and learning process.

References


