

Strategic Interaction 2.0: Instructed Intercultural Pragmatics in an EFL Context

Neil H. Johnson, Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan

Jonathan deHaan, University of Shizuoka, Shizuoka, Japan

ABSTRACT

The potential of web-based 2.0 technology for teaching and assessing intercultural pragmatics has become an area of focus for language educators (Cohen, 2008; Belz, 2005, 2006). Research has highlighted that second and foreign language learners show significant differences from native speakers in language use, in particular, with the execution and comprehension of certain speech acts (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003). Without effective instruction, differences in pragmatics are evident in the English of learners regardless of their first language background or language proficiency. In EFL contexts, such as Japan, where learners have limited exposure to native speaker norms, teaching and learning pragmatic competence can be particularly challenging. The authors describe an ongoing curriculum development project in a Japanese university context, where the goal is to design and implement an effective approach to teaching interlanguage pragmatics. Digitally enhanced Strategic Interaction (SI) sequences (Di Pietro, 1987) provide opportunities for learners to engage in realistic interactive situations that are mediated by use of model conversations, an online wiki space, and digital video technologies. The online space provides opportunities for learner reflection, peer assisted feedback, and detailed intervention from the instructor. Data analysis from pre- and post- written discourse completion tasks suggests that learners are able to use language in more context sensitive ways having engaged with the teaching/learning cycle design.

Keywords: Digital Video, Language Education, Pragmatics, Strategic Interaction, Web-Based 2.0 Technology, Web-Based Teaching

INTRODUCTION

Teaching English in a Japanese university context has constraints that have been well documented. Cultural concerns have been cited to explain low learner motivation (Yashima, 2002), classroom anxiety, and general lack of confidence in communicating (Kitano, 2001). Building a classroom curriculum that accounts

for these issues is challenging. In this paper, we describe one possible approach to solving some of these issues, strategic interaction (SI), and highlight a procedure that is in the process of being developed at two university programs in Japan. The nature of SI, as detailed below, mean that it is ideally suited to dealing with pragmatic issues in the classroom, an area of particular concern for business communication, that has been described as a difficult area to teach. Research has highlighted the fact that

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second and foreign language learners show significant differences from native speakers in language use, in particular, with the execution and comprehension of certain speech acts such as greetings, leave takings and other politeness strategies (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003). Indeed, Kasper (1997) famously posed the question as to whether intercultural pragmatics could in fact be taught at all? Specifically, we are interested here in detailing the research design, initial data collection, and analysis aspects of one approach to teaching intercultural pragmatics through an ongoing teaching/research program. These aspects of the approach are important at this initial stage of implementation, to help establish the learning outcomes and overall efficacy of this process.

TEACHING PRAGMATICS

Pragmatics is usefully defined by Kasper and Rose (2001) as “the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context” (p.2) which places linguistic choice in a particular social context with specific interpersonal meanings governing those choices. The importance of interlanguage pragmatics in language education was underlined by its explicit inclusion in influential models of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990). Though pragmatic awareness and deployment of pragmatically sensitive language has been deemed an important element of what it means to communicate effectively, questions have arisen about how, and indeed, if, pragmatics can be effectively taught and learnt in a classroom setting (Kasper & Rose, 2001). This concern is of course particularly salient in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context where learners may have limited exposure to native speakers of the target language. As Kondo (2008) helpfully reminds us, simply providing learners with scripts and examples of use related to particular situations, and asking them to memorize them, is hardly likely to produce a functional pragmatic understanding in the second language (L2).

Much work in teaching pragmatics has focused on understanding and production of speech acts (Cohen, 1996), including refusals, apologies, requests, and complaining (Rose & Kasper, 2001). Generally, the approach taken has been a cognitive one where developing pragmatic competence is seen as an individual mental process (Soler & Martionez-Flor, 2008). In this research, we take a sociocultural perspective in which development of pragmatic competence is essentially a social undertaking involving the gradual internalization and control over socially constructed forms of mediation. As Lantolf and Thorne (2005) explain: “...schooling is the fundamental site where conceptual knowledge is brought into conscious awareness and appropriated as a means of enhancing our self-regulatory capacity” (p.148). This sociocultural approach suggests the importance of explicit instruction into the concepts underpinning pragmatics, such as social distance and power, as well as the linguistic means through which these concepts are realized in actual communication.

TEACHING PRAGMATICS THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

An obvious application of technology for the teaching of pragmatic and intercultural awareness is in extended telecollaboration, whereby learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds can communicate with each other across time and space through computer-mediated tasks. Some of these studies have found positive results through student self-reports, interviews, or surveys (Furstenberg et al., 2001; Kinginger, 2000). However, other studies have suggested that intercultural contact in and of itself does not naturally lead to cultural understanding and the requisite pragmatic awareness that goes with it (Belz, 2002, 2003). In some cases, researchers have even identified problems with implementation of such schemes for cross-cultural understanding, such as social and institutional constraints and resource accessibility (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003; O’Dowd,

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