

Fostering Awareness of Speech Acts in the EFL Classroom

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Introduction

This paper describes an EFL course that was designed to foster awareness of speech acts. Speech acts, such as apologies, requests, refusals and so on, may be universal, but their realization is often language- and culture-specific. While pragmatic competence is an essential part of communicative competence, and pragmatic failure may result in confusion on the part of the hearer as to the speaker's intention or even a negative assessment of the utterance, EFL learners frequently find it difficult to understand, much less produce, target-language-like speech acts. Olshtain (1989) notes the following potential pragmatic pitfalls:

1. The learner may deviate from accepted norm when choosing a semantic formula for a specific situation.
2. The learner may choose an inappropriate combination of semantic formulas for a specific situation.
3. The learner may perform the speech act with an inappropriate level of intensity.

Research further suggests that EFL learners are more likely to notice grammatical errors than pragmatic errors and consider grammatical errors more serious. Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1999) showed a videotape with 20 scenarios to learners and teachers in Hungary and the U.S. Eight scenarios included sentences that were grammatical but pragmatically inappropriate, another eight included sentences that were pragmatically appropriate but ungrammatical, and there were four more that were both pragmatically appropriate and grammatical. Viewers of the scenarios were asked "Was the last part appropriate/correct?" and further asked to rank how bad the problem was if there was a problem from "Not bad at all" to "Very bad" with six possible rankings.

Table 1 shows the participants' recognition of errors, by item type and Table 2 shows the participants' ratings of those errors, by item type. The ESL students in the U.S. recognized more pragmatic errors than grammatical ones; for the EFL Hungarian students the reverse was true. The teachers in both countries generally recognized the errors, although the teachers in Hungary noticed somewhat fewer pragmatic errors. The ESL U.S. students rated the severity of the error higher for pragmatic errors than for grammatical errors and while the EFL students ranked the severity in conversely. Similarly, the Hungarian and U.S. teachers' ranking of gravity of error was almost directly opposite. These findings suggest a potential significant difference in the attitude to types of errors in the EFL and ESL settings.

Table 1. Participants' Recognition of Errors, by Item Type (Mean %)

Item type	<i>Students</i>		<i>Teachers</i>	
	<u>Hungarian</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>Hungarian</u>	<u>U.S.</u>
Pragmatics	61.9	84.6	79.2	90.7
Grammar	82.4	54.5	100.0	97.6

(Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei, 1999)

Table 2. Participants' Error Ratings, by Item Type

Item type	<i>Students</i>		<i>Teachers</i>	
	<u>Hungarian</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>Hungarian</u>	<u>U.S.</u>
Pragmatics	2.04	3.63	2.77	4.26
Grammar	3.68	1.89	4.23	2.94

(Adapted from Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei, 1999)

At the same time, a learner's perception of the specificity or universality of the realization of a given speech act may influence the learner's tendency to transfer native language norms to the target language. Olshtain (1989) used role plays to elicit apologies in Hebrew from Russian and English learners in eight scenarios which were compared with similar elicitations of native-language informants in the three languages. Olshtain additionally asked the learners whether they believed that Hebrew speakers apologized more or less than speakers of their native language and whether they believed that a native speaker of Hebrew might apologize differently than a speaker of the learner's native language for any of the eight situations. Olshtain found that when learners believed the way in which to apologize

did not vary according to the language in which it was performed, more L1 socio-cultural transfer was apparent.

Clearly, the performance of speech acts is a problematic area of communication for language learners and it is likely that they will benefit from instruction aimed at this aspect of communicative competence. Bardovi-Harlig et al. (1991) note that it is impossible to teach all speech acts but that it is rather more beneficial to awaken students' own abilities for pragmatic analysis. Similarly, Schmidt (1993) asserts the importance of "noticing" in language learning and suggests that pragmatic knowledge is partly conscious. He notes that there is anecdotal evidence that there is a connection between noticing and learning in pragmatics and gives six personal examples. In one example, when learning Portuguese in Brazil Schmidt had difficulty in closing telephone conversations until he noticed that "entao ta" was used shortly before saying "ciao". When he tried it himself it worked. Subsequently he asked Brazilians about pre-closing formulas, but none could explain. However, when Schmidt suggested the use of "entao ta" they agreed with him.

Schmidt (1993) further emphasizes that it is important to not only notice a feature but to understand its function. He gives an example of noticing that a man you know as Mr. Morita is addressed as Morita-kun. A person must notice the form and the contextual information such as sex, age, rank of speaker and addressee but need not conclude that any of the use of the address *-kun* was because of any of these. He points out that tasks can be chosen that "focus the learner's attention on pragmatic forms, functions, and co-occurring features of social context." (p.36)

Rose and Kwai-fun (2001) investigated whether instruction does indeed aid students' understanding of the performance of speech acts, and if so, what type of instruction is most useful. They began with two research questions:

1. Do learners benefit from instruction in compliments and compliment responses in a foreign language context?
2. Are there differential effects of instruction for inductive and deductive approaches to the teaching of compliments and compliment responses in a foreign language context?

The researchers used three groups of university students in Hong Kong: a control group that received no instruction and two groups that re-

ceived instruction via film segments of compliment situations. Of the two groups receiving instruction, one, the inductive group was given questions to lead to discovery of pragmatic patterns or generalizations based on the film segments and additional examples. The other, the deductive group, further received a handout and lecture on nine syntactic formulas before completing the worksheet. Both instructed groups did better in the post-test than the group receiving no instruction, particularly the deductive group.

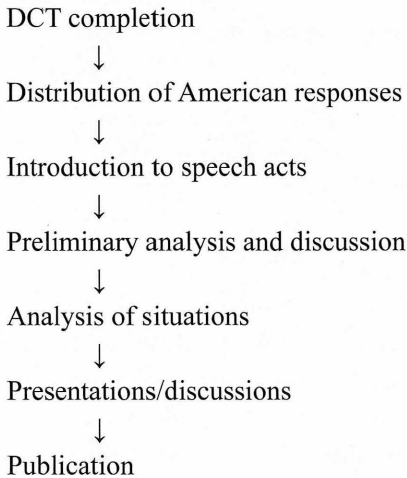
EFL Course Approach

An EFL course was designed to foster an awareness of speech acts. The students were 14 Japanese freshman and sophomores in a seminar-type in English class at a university in Tokyo. The students filled in a discourse completion test in Japanese and English. Following this, they were given the responses to the same DCT that had been completed by American students in English. The students were then introduced to the concept of speech acts, with reference to the semantic formulas for apologies identified by Olshtain (1989) and those for compliment responses used by Herbert (1989) and Manes (1983), which they considered in light of the data regarding these types of speech acts in their own possession.

After this type of group practice and discussion, students were divided into pairs and assigned one situation per pair to try to categorize and calculate frequency of semantic formulas for. They were further encouraged to note results that surprised them or struck them as particularly significant. The situations they examined were related to seven situations that generally required reacting verbally to happy or unhappy news, such as a wedding announcement or the death of a grandmother. The full discourse completion test may be seen in the appendix.

These situations were used because some expressions in English of congratulations and condolences by Japanese speakers may be evaluated as completely or rather culturally inappropriate (Elwood, 2005). It was also believed that examining similar types of situations rather than a range of different situations would allow the students to be less likely to overgeneralize their conclusions while at the same time noting similarities between situations. The students' findings were presented to the class and published in a university journal (Yasuoka et al. 2005). Figure 1 shows a flow chart of the classroom procedure.

Figure 1. Flow of EFL course to foster awareness of speech acts



The students appeared to find the assignment quite challenging. The following difficulties, which will be discussed below, were encountered:

1. Large number of categories
2. Conclusions drawn on the basis of little evidence
3. Classification of different types of responses as same category
4. Classification of same types of responses as different categories
5. Humor misclassifications

Large number of categories

Categorization was difficult, and the student analyses had an average of 15 categories derived from an average of 51 total responses of the three groups of Americans responding in English, Japanese responding in Japanese and Japanese responding in Japanese. Such a large number of categories hindered the recognition of patterns, particularly for those categories with a frequency lower than 20%. Table 3 shows the number of categories for each situation and the number of categories with 20% frequency of higher.

Table 3. Number of Categories for Each Situation

<u>Situation</u>	<u>No. of categories</u>	<u>No. of categories with</u>
		<u>20% frequency or higher</u>
Promotion	15	7
Wedding	11	8
Grant	11	9
Grandmother's death	16	7
Dog's death	16	6
Internship	16	7
Weight gain	18	1

Conclusions drawn on the basis of little evidence

At times, the students were apt to make conclusions based on little evidence. For example, in the Dog's Death situation, two American responses were classified as "diverting", as the respondent offered to go somewhere with the owner of the dog to cheer him or her up. On the other hand, no Japanese respondents tried to divert the dog's owner so the students concluded doing so was inappropriate in Japanese culture but appropriate in American society. However, the low use of this category among the American responses does not suggest that such a conclusion may be drawn.

In the Promotion situation, noting that the American responses were shorter than the Japanese ones, the students suggested that it was possible that Americans have pride and don't want to congratulate rival while Japanese create harmony through words. While taciturnity may imply churlishness, it is impossible to conclude so without further evidence.

Classification of different types of responses as same category

Perhaps due to a misunderstanding of the meaning of some responses, students sometimes classified different types of responses as the same category. For example, in the Weight Gain situation both "It's so hard to lose weight" and "Obesity is a serious problem" were allocated to the "general theory" category despite the first response appearing to be an attempt to sympathize with the overweight speaker rather than the expression of a general theory.

Classification of same types of responses as different categories

The opposite problem, classification of the same type of responses as different categories also occurred. For example, "昔のあなたに比べてもう少し太りすぎだね" ("Compared to what you were like in the past you

have gained a little weight”) was classified as opinion and ”I have to agree” was classified as irony, yet both could be simply classified as agreement.

Humor and other misclassifications

The students classified some American responses as humor that were unlikely to have been so intended by the respondents. For example, the self-deprecating “Any advice for a slacker like me?” in the Promotion situation was classified in this way, as was “And the organization is really missing out by not having you” in the Internship situation. Similarly, “Maybe you need to make your resume flashier. You could probably get in if it stands out from others” was classified as a negative comment in the Internship situation.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the students’ classification was generally solid and they were able to observe some interesting differences in patterns of communication. For example, in the Wedding situation, the students noted varying strategies: Americans tended to ask questions while JE and JJ responses were suggestions or comments.

The students also identified differences in lexical choices. In the Internship situation “proud” was used by 21% of the Japanese responding in English while no Americans used it. This pattern was also pointed out by the students analyzing the Grant situation who found that 15% of the JE responses used “respect” and 30% used “proud” and that 21% of the JJ group used “尊敬します” (“I respect you”) and 14% used “誇りに思います” (I am proud of you”). In the Wedding situation the students discovered that no Americans used “glad” and no Japanese used “happy”.

A difference between JE responses and on the other hand AE and JJ responses was also noted in the Wedding situation in which the JE respondents made reference to an invitation to the wedding, while the other two groups did not do so.

Discussion

There were various problems encountered by students in their attempts to classify responses to discourse completion tests targeting speech acts related to responses to happy and unhappy news. The students found it difficult to find general patterns in the responses, leading to a large number of categories. Moreover, they were often quick to draw conclusions with little evidence, rather than to make hypotheses and search for additional

evidence to support them. Understandably, the students also were at times confused by the meaning of the American responses. This led to classification of different types of responses as the same category, classification of similar types of responses as different categories, and misclassifications of humor and other responses.

On the other hand, the students identified many interesting differences between the Japanese and American responses. They particularly noticed differences in types of sentences, for example, interrogatives and declaratives, as well as differences in lexical choice. These types of differences may be easier for students to analyze.

While there were some problems with the students' classification and analyses, the students stated that they enjoyed the approach, which forced them to grapple directly with American responses and compare them with their own responses. Discussions following the presentations were lively and fruitful. It is believed that the goal of making the students more conscious of potential differences in the realization of speech acts was attained.

Barron (2002) points out that the L2 pragmatic norm may not be an appropriate option for a range of reasons. There are variations related to region, gender, social class and age. In addition, native speakers' communication may be flawed or reflect the personality of the speaker. Moreover, there may be reason to continue playing the part of a foreigner: native speakers may dislike foreigners who try to act overly native-like, for example, by using slang, and native speakers may judge learners by native-speaker norms if they appear pragmatically competent. Conversely, some interlanguage features such as overuse of external mitigation may be useful for learners. Finally, being different may be a strategy of dis-identification; not all foreigners aspire to the native-language model.

Barron's points are certainly valid. The "ideal speaker" of American English does not exist. Moreover, this paper does not intend to suggest that American patterns of communication are the most appropriate model for English learners, and that learners should strive to emulate them. However, the skill of noticing differences can be applied to any communicative situation, whether regarding another variety of English, other foreign languages, or varieties within the speaker's own native language. Noticing these differences allows the learner to be more aware of his or her communicative

choices and to understand better some pragmatic reasons that communication may fail. It is hoped that researchers will continue to design EFL courses that aim to foster an awareness of speech acts, covering other types of speech acts in addition to those already investigated and building on the strengths and addressing the problems of those already undertaken.

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Appendix: Discourse Completion Test

Situation 1: You've been working for a company for three years. It is announced that a colleague with the same level of experience has just been promoted.

You say:

Situation 2: While shopping at a department store you run into someone you used to live near two years ago.

You: How have you been doing?

Former Neighbor: Well, my big news is I got married last month.

You say:

Situation 3: Your professor has won a prestigious research grant.

You say:

Situation 4: You haven't seen a classmate for a few days. Then you see the classmate in a coffee shop.

You: Hey, how's it going?

Classmate: Actually, my grandmother passed away so I was away from school this past week.

You say:

Situation 5: Your best friend's dog was hit by a car and died.

You say:

Situation 6: A friend just found out that they didn't get an internship that they applied for. This is the second time that they have applied.

You say:

Situation 7: A close friend has gained a lot of weight recently.

Friend: I've really got to lose some weight!

You say: