

What Teachers Can Do in the Pedagogical Trinity: Pragmatics, Grammar, and Communicative Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

While pragmatic awareness plays a vital role in developing communicative competence, it is less likely to be addressed in the Japanese EFL classroom partly due to lower pragmatic awareness among teachers. In fact, many cases of pragmatic failure are related to deficiencies of adequate teaching, which need to be urgently addressed in order to prevent learners from making unintentional mistakes. Towards that end, this study explores possible paths to promote pragmatic pedagogy and proposes one feasible approach, fully utilizing what is already available in the classroom – the integration of pragmatics and grammar pedagogy. Although grammar-oriented approaches are often cited as one of the causes for ineffective EFL learning, this integration can benefit the classroom where teachers need to satisfy various demands such as implementation of communicative language teaching (CLT) and preparation for college entrance exams. This approach will have great significance for teachers who struggle to balance those needs, especially for Japanese teachers of English (JTEs), many of whom believe that their strength is more likely to lie in their grammatical competence. The implications of this study may lead to more holistic approaches to L2 pragmatics with new teaching perceptions in the demanding EFL classroom.

INTRODUCTION

During my 13 years with an American company in Tokyo working as a communication consultant, I witnessed many communication breakdowns caused by Japanese speakers of English (JSEs) and their inappropriate utterances in cross-cultural contexts. For example, JSEs may surprise native speakers of English (NSEs) by requesting them to do something in an imperative manner, refusing NSE's requests by abruptly saying, "No," without providing any further explanations or reasons, or asking questions about personal matters such as their age during introductions.

When such disturbances occur in cross-cultural communication, they can be disruptive because native speakers are more likely to attribute the breakdowns to personality issues rather than linguistic causes (Gass & Selinker, 2008). It was frustrating for me to see those JSE employees being unaware that their inappropriate utterances may have caused seemingly "unfair" evaluations from their NSE managers, sowing the seeds of discord and mutual distrust between the JSEs and NSEs within the organization. Neither side seemed to realize

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what could have been the fundamental cause of the problem.

This type of communication breakdown due to a lack of contextual appropriateness is referred to by researchers as *pragmatic failure*. Thomas (1983) defines pragmatic failure as “the inability to understand what is meant by what is said” (p.91), and further analyzes that there are two types of pragmatic failure: *pragmalinguistic failure* and *sociopragmatic failure*. Pragmalinguistic failure is “basically a linguistic problem, caused by differences in the linguistic encoding of pragmatic force” (p. 99) and thus easier to overcome because learners are more likely to try to conform to the pragmalinguistic norms of the target language. Meanwhile, sociopragmatic failure is based on different beliefs and cultures in linguistic behavior, and thus more complicated and difficult to address. Both of the deficiencies appear to be deeply rooted among second language speakers, and it seems that even advanced-level learners may indicate marked imbalance between their grammatical competence and pragmatic awareness (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998).

Despite the importance of developing communicative competence, pragmatic awareness is still less likely to be addressed in the EFL classroom partly due to the lack of pragmatic awareness among teachers of the second or foreign language; naturally, teachers cannot teach what they are unaware of (Judd, 1999). While there are previous studies focusing on learners and raising their pragmatic awareness through explicit instruction (Fordyce & Fukazawa, 2004; House, 1996; Kondo, 2004; Rose, 2005), pragmatic awareness focusing on teachers and their perceptions has not been fully investigated to date. The purpose of this study is to explore ways to promote pragmatic pedagogy through raising pragmatic awareness among teachers, Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) in particular, while addressing the realities they are confronted with in the classroom.

TEACHING-INDUCED ERRORS IN L2 PRAGMATICS

A close examination of JSEs’ pragmatic deficiencies reported by previous studies as well as those I witnessed in various business situations reveals that many of those cases are closely related to deficiencies of adequate teaching. This is a very critical issue because learners can make those mistakes as a result of their diligent classwork. For example, several researchers report pragmatic failure in JSEs’ using *had better*, which stems from the classroom practice of teaching *had better* as being equivalent to *shita ho ga yoi* in Japanese, representing weak force instead of a warning (Fujioka, 2003; Rinnert, 1995; Stephens, 2003). The prevailing traditional practice of the grammar-translation method can mislead learners to believe that there are equivalent words across languages, without taking into account individual contextual factors.

Another example involving this type of negative transfer based on L1-L2 equivalence perception is seen in the overgeneralization of using *please*, as in saying, “Open the door, please,” when extra politeness is actually required. The error can result from the instruction that *please* is a polite way of making a request (Gore, 1987), with no further explanation on pragmatic aspects. With the instruction, it is quite natural that many learners overgeneralize that they can make a request politely as long as they use *please*, without realizing it could be a command which expects compliance depending on the context. Furthermore, Matsuura (1998) reports JSEs are likely to perceive “Could I borrow a pen?” as being more polite than “May I borrow a pen?” because they have been taught that interrogatives with past tense modals are more polite than with present tense modals. Also, JSEs often use *I would like you to* inappropriately in making requests because they learn the phrase in high school and perceive it as being more polite than *Could you...?*, and the strategies are relatively

automatized (Rinnert, 1995; Rinnert & Iwai, 2010).

Furthermore, perhaps the aspect of directness in JSEs' speech could also be analyzed in view of teaching-induced failure. Beebe and Takahashi (1989) report that many JSEs claim that EFL classes in Japan stress the need for them to be more direct and explicit in English than they are in Japanese. While this instruction may be effective to improve presentation skills or logical thinking process, it is not necessarily helpful in improving communicative skills in human interactions. However, since teachers often fail to mention this latter factor and just emphasize the need for directness, JSEs may try to converge with what they perceive to be the NS norms and thus again put themselves at risk for pragmatic failure.

RESPONSIBILITY OF TEACHERS

These teaching-induced mistakes seem to be closely related to pragmalinguistic failure, as Thomas (1983) explains that pragmalinguistic failure may arise from two identifiable sources: teaching-induced errors and pragmalinguistic transfer. Also, Matsuura (1998) claims that in second language acquisition, "politeness usually means pragmalinguistically appropriate language usage" (p. 34). While sociopragmatic aspects may be difficult to teach, as previously discussed, learners could benefit considerably from receiving instruction for at least pragmalinguistic matters, and it would be certainly the teachers' responsibility to teach at least what is learnable in the classroom. Towards that end, it is urgently required to explore the possibilities to raise pragmatic awareness among teachers so that they can start addressing pragmatic features in the classroom instead of misleading learners into teaching-induced errors.

However, for the EFL context in Japan, the fact that JTEs, who account for the majority of teachers, are advanced learners themselves would add another level of complexity. Teachers are more likely to follow their own learning practice when they teach, because teachers' beliefs and their conceptualization of L2 teaching tend to be based on their own learning experiences (Borg, 2003; Pajeres, 1992). Unfortunately, many JTEs have hardly had learning experience in pragmatics, and having no model to follow can discourage them from undertaking this new endeavor.

Also, in their daily practice teachers are faced with demanding workloads and pressure both inside and outside the classroom. What are the realities they are confronted with that could be a hindrance to promoting pragmatic pedagogy? Finding an answer to that question would be a great challenge because, as mentioned earlier, there have been very few studies on pragmatic awareness focusing on teachers and their perceptions. However, as pragmatic competence is categorized as one of the main elements of communicative language ability (Bachman, 1990), investigating how teachers perceive and implement communicative language teaching (CLT) in the Japanese EFL context should provide some valuable insight, and that is where the research on CLT comes into play.

REALITIES IN IMPLEMENTING CLT

Since the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) started to promote CLT in the late 1980's, there has been a considerable amount of literature on teachers' perceptions and practices regarding CLT (Browne & Wada, 1998; Gorsuch, 2000; Law, 1995; Matsuura, Chiba & Hilderbrandt, 2001; Nishino, 2008; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008; Sakui, 2004; Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004; Sato, 2002; Taguchi, 2005).

Most of those studies point out teachers' pedagogical preference of a communicative paradigm, indicating that many JTEs realize the importance of CLT. At the same time, many of the research findings suggest that CLT has not been effectively implemented despite the enormous efforts to do so by MEXT. For possible reasons for this, Sakui (2004) points out the dilemma that many JTEs face in integrating CLT and form-based instruction, and Taguchi (2005) states that teachers are "in an awkward position, caught between the objectives of the national curriculum and the constraints that discourage active practice in the communicative approach" (p. 10).

One of those constraints on implementing CLT is high-stakes entrance examinations, which often influence teachers' classroom practices. Even when teachers seek to incorporate CLT into their classroom, they often feel pressed to place priority on preparing students for entrance examinations, and their teaching practices are more likely to follow the traditional grammar-based approach. Does this mean changing the examination system would bring improvement in promoting CLT?

While Nishino (2008) reports that teachers regard changing classroom conditions as a prerequisite to implement CLT, and that observation is generally shared in the research field, changing sociopolitical or contextual factors would usually require tremendous time and effort. Also, Gorsuch (2000), while suggesting the need to change the examination system to include questions to test students' communicative ability, cautions that such changes may not be enough because her findings suggest that "teachers might be more resistant to CLT activities at the classroom level than at the institutional level" (p. 700). This resistance to change could be witnessed even among learners preparing for the exams, as they are likely to indicate a strong preference for conservative teaching styles (Kobayashi, 2001; Matsuura, Chiba & Hilderbrandt, 2001) which focus on reading comprehension and grammar learning.

These findings have led me to realize that, instead of seeking to change the current system, it may be more feasible to fully utilize what is already available in the classroom and try to sufficiently meet the learners' needs, that is, the integration of CLT and grammar pedagogy. This combination of grammar teaching and CLT, pragmatic pedagogy in particular, seems to have potential in two aspects. First is the prospect that it would promote pragmatic pedagogy because many JTEs seem already to feel comfortable teaching grammar and therefore the effort to raise pragmatic awareness within the scope of grammar teaching could be the most effective and sound approach. Second is the prospect that it could provide a clearer focus to JTEs, who may be still confused about what to teach in CLT, and encourage them to implement CLT in their practices. Although this combination of grammar teaching and CLT, pragmatic pedagogy in particular, may initially seem to be somewhat contradictory, it is nonetheless appropriate as it appears to be supported by the widely held view that grammatical competence works as a part of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980).

HOW TO INTEGRATE GRAMMAR AND PRAGMATICS

The proposed approach of integrating grammar and pragmatics may bring about the greatest effect for JTEs, who often perceive grammatical competence as their teaching strength. In addition, while JTEs are more likely to perceive their being non-native speakers as a drawback in teaching communicative aspects and this lack of confidence may become a great hindrance in implementing CLT (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008), they do possess strengths even in CLT, sharing linguistic and cultural knowledge with their students and making the learning relevant to them based on their understanding of the students' lives (Samimy &

Kobayashi, 2004). I believe this approach could allow them to leverage not only those existing strengths but even seemingly-constraining factors such as high-stakes entrance exams, which are often identified as one of the obstacles to implementing CLT.

In fact, contrary to the impression held by many educators that entrance exams are regressive factors based on the grammar-translation method, the content of college entrance exams have actually been less likely to demand discrete grammatical knowledge, and instead, for many years questions have involved a variety of linguistic and cultural elements, including lexico-grammatical knowledge, collocation, rhetorical functions and even some pragmatic features (Guest, 2000; Law, 1994; Torikai, 2013). Therefore, when grammatical features are taught during the class, teachers should be able to, as required, include explanation of pragmalinguistic aspects as part of lexical learning.

This approach can be carried out quite straightforward in the classroom. For example, in order to prevent those teaching-induced errors which are mentioned earlier in this article, when the phrase *had better* is introduced during the lesson about modal auxiliary verbs, in addition to the translation of *shita ho ga yoi* teachers should mention the pragmalinguistic feature that the phrase can be a warning which suggests that there will be negative results if the advice is not followed. Also, to make a polite request, teachers should emphasize the danger of overgeneralizing certain rules, making it clear that adding *please* would not necessarily make the request polite. At the same time, in teaching the grammar of embedded questions or the subjunctive mood, the explanation can be extended to a polite request using a bi-clausal phrase such as *I was wondering if you could*. Or, when teaching the phrase *see to it that*, which appears quite often in entrance examinations, teachers can add the explanation that it is not equivalent to *torihakarau*, the Japanese translation that many dictionaries provide for the phrase, but rather suggests a strong command in the sentence such as “Please see to it that everything is ready.” For all the above examples, the instruction should stress the importance of considering contexts where each phrase is to be used, which is the very nature of pragmatics that seems to be missing in many grammar lessons.

In a pilot study, I have tried this approach and obtained very promising results (Oda-Sheehan, 2015). In the study, I carried out a 100-minute grammar lesson on the general usage of modals and auxiliary verbs using a typical college-entrance-test-prep method, stressing lexico-grammatical aspects as often featured in examinations and using textbooks specifically designed for test preparation. During the class, I briefly explained pragmalinguistic features about the usage of *had better* and *please*, as described above. A week later, in order to see the effect of such instruction, I conducted a questionnaire survey in discourse completion tasks (DCTs) to the participants of the grammar class as well as to learners of a linguistically similar level who did not attend the class. When the participants were asked to judge whether the responses in the DCTs were appropriate or not, those who had attended the class indicated much higher pragmatic awareness than those who did not receive the instruction. The fact that the learners showed significant improvement in their pragmatic awareness after attending the class, which they had perceived as a grammar lesson for test preparation, may well suggest that they had absorbed the pragmalinguistic knowledge efficiently through the grammar lesson. Although the sample was rather small and there were some limitations in the study, the results are perfectly in line with the view by Thomas (1983) that pragmalinguistic features of the target language can be taught quite easily as part of grammar, and the findings of this study seem to have brought the theory and the practice together.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Grammar-oriented approaches are often cited as being one of the causes for ineffective EFL learning, and in fact, Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) suggests that the focus on grammatical competence could hinder the development of pragmatic competence through certain priorities implicitly indicated to learners. Nevertheless, learners' ability in grammar, which refers broadly to formal linguistic knowledge including not only syntax but also lexis and phonology, may well have an impact on their development of pragmatic competence (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010), and thus there is a great significance in learning grammar not only for entrance exams but also for pragmatic learning.

In order to bring success to this amalgamation, teachers would need to raise their own pragmatic awareness and competence. It will be a challenge for JTEs whose L1 is not English, but once they have initial awareness, they will surely be surprised to see how many pragmatic features are already included in textbooks, entrance exams, and teaching materials. Also, JTEs can seek the help of native English speaking teachers (NESTs), whose linguistic skills and expertise as native speakers of the language would bring out valuable insights and authenticity to the classroom pedagogy. In fact, this collaboration between NESTs and JTEs in pragmatic pedagogy might even bring a new phase to the team-teaching arrangement already common in the EFL classroom in Japan, and the possibility of that development is one of my research topics for the future. Optimizing the effects of team teaching would make a great contribution to raising pragmatic awareness of JTEs, and eventually of learners, so that learners will be equipped to cope with practical communication outside the classroom.

Mizuta (2009) points out that although Japan is an EFL country, the business world is becoming more and more of an ESL environment. During the "lost two decades" when Japan faced serious economic problems, the business sector pushed the government to reform the curriculum and raise people's English proficiency (Hashimoto, 2011), and MEXT's current drive to promote CLT is apparently a response to those demands and pressure from many global corporations (Erikawa, 2013). As teachers are expected to help students be better prepared to meet the societal needs, they cannot afford to be insensitive to the gap between what is required in the society (i.e., communication/pragmatics) and what is being offered in the classroom (grammar/test preparation). There needs to be a solid bridge between those two factors, and it is certainly the teachers' role to form such a bridge. Language teachers who would overlook their students' pragmatic failure should realize that such pragmatic failure could cause misunderstanding by gatekeepers in the students' lives, possibly leading to lost opportunities in their future. It would not be fair to the learners if they unintentionally fell into such communication failure due to the lack of pedagogical innovation in the classroom.

At the same time, many teachers are obliged to address another need of their students – preparation for college entrance exams. It is this complicated mixture of learning needs that this proposed approach is aiming to address. The implication that pragmatic pedagogy could be successfully integrated with grammar pedagogy should be very encouraging to teachers, especially JTEs who may have struggled between the MEXT's drive to promote CLT and the pressure to prepare their students for entrance examinations. Taking this integrative approach, JTEs could be led to change their long-held perception of "communication or grammar" to "communication AND grammar", opening up doors to more pedagogical opportunities and holistic approaches in that direction, which will surely make for an inspiring topic to explore in the future.

Teachers are vital agents in the classroom, and are confronted with many challenges and conflicting needs of various parties including learners, institutions, and society. It might be easier for them to treat these challenges as excuses to give up, but teachers who care about

their learners and their learning consequences would continue to explore, making the best of what is available in the given situation, to bring about the best results for the learners. The approach proposed in this article would be worth considering in this continued endeavor.

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