Awareness-raising and the Cooperative Principle: Re-thinking pragmatics for the classroom

Dr Neil Murray

University of South Australia

Malinowski:

Only by looking at language as use, in its "context of situation" can we understand the functions served by particular grammatical structures.

Pragmatic competence:

The ability to mediate between form and context, both in the production and reception of language, such that we are able, accurately and appropriately, to express and interpret intended meaning.

"Even fairly advanced language learners' communicative acts regularly contain pragmatic errors, or deficits, in that they fail to convey or comprehend the intended illocutionary force or politeness value [of utterances]" (1989: 10)

"… a learner of high grammatical proficiency will not necessarily show concomitant pragmatic competence" (Bardovi-Harlig 1996: 21) – a real concern given that people are more forgiving of grammatical mistakes than pragmatic failure (Crandall and Basturkman 2004: 38).

Traditional approaches to teaching pragmatics

- Presentation of lists of useful expressions
- Conversations and dialogues offering pragmatically inaccurate models
- "Expression X can be used in situations 1, 2 & 3."
- "To perform function Y, you can use expressions 4, 5 &6."

a. There is little emphasis on what Bachman refers to as an "examination of the pragmatic conditions that determine whether or not a given utterance is acceptable to other users of the language as an act, or the performance of an intended function

b. Therefore, whatever learners glean of the relationship between form and function – between what is said and what is meant – its applicability is largely restricted to the particular instances of its use they have experienced in their learning such understanding enables.

c. They are consequently deprived of the productivity that comes from an understanding of general principles and the process of discovery.

- Impractical given large number of speech acts

- There's no obvious instructional order other than frequency or student need (Flowerdew 1990)

- Rather than focusing on the intricacies of individual SAs, we should be making learners 'more aware that pragmatic functions exist in language…in order that they may be more aware of these functions as learners' (Bardivi-Harlig 1996)

- Learners should be encouraged to think for themselves about culturally appropriate ways to compliment a teacher as 'a way of awakening their own lay abilities for pragmatic analysis' (B-H)

- Learners need to be given a 'vocabulary' via which to do this and which will prepare learners for noticing.

- ❖Focussing on speech acts that reflect learner needs or interests.
- ❖Focussing on speech acts in the performance of which deviation from the L1 norm is most critical to meaning and interpersonal relations.
- ❖Using authentic materials. (This raises issues of its own, as we shall see.)
- ❖Engaging learners in discourse completion tasks.
- ❖Having students translate speech acts from their own language into English and discuss the pragmatic norms of different speech communities.

- Encouraging learners to become their own ethnographers and to observe how speech acts are realised in the L2 and in particular contexts. This may involve collecting, analysing and reporting on data.

- Incorporating native-speaker role plays into classroom activities as a focus of student observation. Developing observation tasks around these and allowing learners to ask the native speakers questions etc.

- Providing opportunities for consideration and guided discussion of how speech acts function in the learners' own languages, and the consequences of inappropriately enacting those rules governing their performance.

- Using video as a vehicle for getting students to compare how speech acts are realised differently in different contexts.

- Having students choose a speech act they are interested in and observe it in naturalistic or rehearsed settings.

Quantity: Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange). Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Quality: Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Relation: Be relevant.

Manner: Be perspicuous. Avoid obscurity of expression. Avoid ambiguity. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity). Be orderly. (Grice 1975: 45)

Politeness: "Do not say that which may lead to loss of face" (Leech 1983)

T: *During conversation, what do you think are some of the things that influence what we say and how we say it?*

Ss:

1 who it is we're talking to and our relationship to them
2 where the communication's taking place
3 the feelings of the other person
4 the impression we want to give of ourselves
5 the kind of image we want to project
6 our purpose in communicating
7 what has been said previously in the conversation
8 how much we want to share with the person we're talking to

T: *How do these things affect what we say and how we say it?* (The idea at this stage would be to generate general rather than specific observations.)

i) They sometimes affect the amount we say.

ii) They may affect how direct we are.

iii) We might not say exactly what we feel.

iv) We may lie or be dishonest.

v) Our language might be more formal or more casual, depending.

X) *Why are we sometimes indirect in the way we say things?*
Y) *What's happens when we use very informal language in formal situations?*
Z) *Why might the amount we say be important?*
Why might we say more than we need to say?
Why might we say less? Can you think of a specific example?

a) If we don't say enough, people won't understand us.
b) If we're too brief, people might feel we're hiding something, or maybe we're unwilling to say more.
c) If we say very little it might seem unfriendly or rude.
d) It allows us to be rude or unfriendly if we want to . . . if we don't like someone or their behaviour say.
e) People see us as boring if we say too much.
f) People don't like individuals who talk too much and dominate conversations. It's a power thing.
g) It's not good to stand out too much.
h) We might say less because we want to show respect for the person we're talking to; maybe he's our boss, for example, or he's older than us.
I) By not saying much, we can show that we feel hurt or angry.

- *If we're very close to someone we'll probably be more direct and say exactly what we feel.*

- *If it's a relaxed, informal situation we'll probably talk more and use more casual language.*

- *Sometimes we lie because we don't want to hurt the other person's feelings.*

For instance…

2 Related Issues: Authenticity and EIL

-Even within a single country that shares a common culture, the 'native speaker' is actually a diverse group among whom conversational styles can vary.

-The L2 learner may find indigestible socio-pragmatic aspects of the target language culture that are not in sync with his or her own values and beliefs - a situation encountered by Takenoya (1995) in his study of Americans learning Japanese as a foreign language and who were uncomfortable with using what they regarded as sexist system of address.