Developing Pragmatic Competence

by Yuji Abe and Kerry Louw

How would you feel if your student greeted you by saying, "Hi, my teacher – you are looking fat today"? Would you judge the student as rude, or would you feel flattered? Would you ignore the comment, would you react angrily, or would you ask a few questions to understand the student's intention?

The notion of pragmatic competence

Pragmatic competence is the ability, when communicating, to factor in the context such as the interlocutor's culture, age, gender, role, and status, and to adjust word choices, tone, and register accordingly (Garcia, 2004).

In a North American context, telling someone they are looking fat is typically received as a criticism. However, in another cultural context, the same expression sometimes functions as a complement, acknowledging affluence and good health. "Pragmatic errors can easily lead to misconstruals of speaker intentions, which can in turn lead to negative judgements about a speaker's personality or moral character" (Vásquez & Sharpless, 2009, p. 6).

The importance of pragmatic competence development in higher education

In an academic context, pragmatic competence is essential when making friends, conducting group work, negotiating assignment due dates, interacting appropriately with TAs and professors, and most importantly, integrating into the larger campus community. ESL learners (international students) often have limited socialization outside the classroom. As such, it's important that instructors turn situations like "You are looking fat today" into pragmatic opportunities, helping learners develop pragmatic competence.

Teaching pragmatics

A method for developing pragmatic competence includes observing authentic discourse, becoming aware (with the help of explicit instruction) of what is and what is not considered appropriate in the given context and then practicing to put the new discourse strategies into use. Crandall and Basturkmen (2004) state that "[l]earners not only enjoyed this type of instruction, but were able to learn from it" (p. 44)

We suggest instructors follow these steps:

1. Provide authentic language samples.
2. Identify the culture specific pragmatic error from your cultural context.
3. Ask learners to identify their intent in the message sent.

4. Ask learners to make a list of their "normal" language to achieve the intent.
5. Provide learners with a list of your "normal" language to achieve this intent to find similarities and differences.
6. Provide opportunities to test the language identified as different.
7. Ask learners to reconstruct their message using language that will achieve the intention.

Mapping the process to the example provided will look like this:

1. **Provide authentic language samples.**

   Objective:

   Introduce a wide range of realistic situations and provide authentic samples of discourse to raise learner's pragmatic understanding.

   Example:

   T: "Someone said, 'Hi my teacher- You are looking fat today.'"

2. **Identify the culture specific pragmatic error from your cultural context.**

   Objective:
   Explicitly identify the words that caused the misunderstanding.
   Example:
    T: "I would like to talk about the word 'fat' because I usually don't expect to hear this word in greetings. In my culture, it's an insult."

3. **Ask learners to identify the intent in their message sent.**
   Objective:
   Raise consciousness around the need to examine the purpose of an utterance, and not just its lexical message.

   Example:
   T: "What was your intention when you said I was looking fat today?"
   S: "I was trying to greet you in a friendly way. I want us to have a good relationship."

4. **Ask learners to make a list of their "normal" language to achieve the intent.**

   Objective:
   Raise consciousness of the way culture informs our word choices. Keep in mind there are differences due to personality, worldview, religion, etc.

   Example:
   S: You must be tired from your great work yesterday.

5. **Provide learners with a list of your "normal" language to achieve this intent to find similarities and differences.**

Objective:
Ask learners to compare their own list to yours and find similarities and differences.

Example:

Learner's List	Instructor's List (Provided)
• Hello, teacher. • You must be tired from your great work yesterday. • How do you do?	• Hi. • Hi, how are you? • Nice to see you.

In this example, *Hello teacher* and *Hi* are similar. Their other greetings are different.

6. **Provide opportunities to test the language identified as different.**

Objective:
Raise awareness of the consequences of language choices.

Example:
T: "If you want to volunteer, shout out your greeting that's different than mine for feedback. I will do thumbs up/thumbs down to show appropriateness and then tell you why."
S: "How do you do?"
T: Thumbs down. "It's too formal and that makes me feel uncomfortable."

7. **Ask learners to reconstruct their message using language that will achieve the intention.**

Objective:
Repair their original language to be received as culturally appropriate and effective and confirm their choices.

Example:
T: "Now that you know 'How do you do?' is too formal, what would you say instead?"
S: "I will just say 'How are you?'"
T: "I think that is appropriate in my cultural 'norm.'"

Tips

Once learners become familiar with the process and gain some understanding of the purpose of building pragmatic competence, pragmatics can become a regular feature of language instruction. Pragmatics can be included in your lesson planning along with vocabulary building, communicative acts, grammar, and so on.

We let our learners know that, although in class we are focused on increasing their understanding of what is effective and appropriate in *our* culture, we also appreciate the opportunity to learn about what is appropriate in *their* culture. It offers us all the opportunity become more effective intercultural communicators.

Key Points

The more opportunities provided, the more comfortable learners become in engaging with differences and building pragmatic competence and awareness. Using this 8-step process can enable you to add pragmatics and intercultural competence into your regular lesson plan to increase your learners' pragmatic competence.

Our Resources

We have decoded greetings and introductions for a job interview context. Click here for *Navigating the Interview A guide for Candidates.* See page 32-33. We also have created authentic language samples of greetings. Watch the first 2 minutes of the 4 Videos here.

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References

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